**The other twin : a study of the plays of Wilkie Collins**

Clarke, Alison Thora

# THE OTHER TWIN:

# A STUDY OF THE PLAYS OF WILKIE COLLINS

Alison Thora Clarke

Department of English, King's College London

Submitted for PhD degree July 2005

# ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis is a study of the plays of Wilkie Collins in the social and theatrical context of the times, and the context of his other writings, most notably his novels. Several of the plays discussed in the thesis were adapted from his novels, including his most popular and enduring works, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, whilst other plays were original works either written in collaboration or alone. The plays are examined in the context of the climate of the Victorian theatre and are, where applicable, compared with other dramatic works of the time. Contemporary conditions of the drama and the stage are studied, including some discussion of prominent figures of the time and Collins's relationship with them. The first chapter gives a brief introduction to Collins and the body of scholarly work about his life and works. The next two chapters provide an overview of theatre in the Victorian age including working conditions, social and class attitudes to the theatre and the dramatic literature of the period. Subsequent chapters discuss the dramatic works of Wilkie Collins chronologically in turn, studying the plays, the productions and theatres in which they were produced, and critical reception of the works by the major papers and dramatic critics of the time, as well as Collins's own feelings on dramatic literature and dramatic theory. Given that Dickens and Collins met and became close friends during an amateur production of Bulwer-Lytton's play *Not So Bad As We Seem,* their relationship also forms a part of the general discussion. The conclusion asserts that Wilkie Collins had some influence on the works of the dramatists of the later Victorian period, who are often seen as rising above the morass of melodramatic drama that was churned out during the majority of the Victorian age.

*Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also ...*

*Wilkie Collins, 1852*

TABLE OF CONTENTS


Chapter 1 – Introduction ..... 1

Chapter 2 – Victorian Theatre ..... 15

Chapter 3 – Victorian Dramatic Literature ..... 42

Chapter 4 – Collins's Early Plays ..... 61

Chapter 5 – *Black & White* ..... 87

Chapter 6 – *The Woman in White* ..... 108

Chapter 7 – *Man and Wife* ..... 133

Chapter 8 – *The New Magdalen* ..... 151

Chapter 9 – *Miss Gwilt* ..... 176

Chapter 10 – *The Moonstone* ..... 192

Chapter 11 – Conclusion ..... 218

Bibliography ..... 232

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

# Chapter 1

Wilkie Collins has long been considered the father of the detective novel, the master of sensation fiction, and is best known as the author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, two of the greatest examples of nineteenth century sensation and detective fiction. But Collins was much more than this. He was a prolific journalist, a master story-teller, an author of twenty three novels, a writer who could almost match Dickens word for word, given the opportunity (he wrote almost half of *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* during a working holiday in Cumberland and Doncaster, suggested by Dickens after the hectic theatrical tour of *The Frozen Deep*), an accomplished short story writer, and a successful playwright, who contributed to the development of dramatic literature during the nineteenth century. If he is not now considered to have written the first detective novel, he was the first to put the detective play on stage, with his own dramatic version of *The Moonstone*. Nuel Pharr Davis, in his biography of Wilkie Collins, also credits him with having "forced his theory of the Actual down the throats of all later generations of novelists". Davis explains that, "at the level of (...) Conan Doyle this meant stickling for accuracy in the now familiar paraphernalia of laboratory, police, and legal routine". For the writer in general, this meant "taking the trouble to go and look at one's settings before putting them into a novel. Fuzzy backgrounds became harder to put off on the public".[1]

In recent years, Collins the novelist has been revisited more frequently by academic writers. Scholars around the world are re-examining his fictional works in their sociological and historical context. Catherine Peters's seminal biography,

---

[1] Davis, Nuel Pharr. *The Life of Wilkie Collins*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956, pp. 216-217.

*The King of Inventors*, was published in 1991, shedding more light on Collins's life than ever before. This work, in combination with the delightful *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* by William M. Clarke, who is married to Collins's great-granddaughter, has made us far better informed about Collins's life. Also recently published is Andrew Gasson's extremely useful "dictionary", *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide*, of 1998.

In the decades after Collins's death, fairly little was written about him, and the majority his novels, until around the last decade of the 20th century, were largely out of print. Apart from various obituaries and recollections by friends, Collins for the most part fell out of the reading public's eye. In 1932, Walter De La Mare considered 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins' in a collection of essays entitled *The Eighteen Sixties*, edited by John Drinkwater. In 1951 Kenneth Robinson published a biography of Collins, and S M Ellis included a critical biography as part of his *Wilkie Collins, LeFanu and Others*. These were followed in 1956 by a biography of Collins by Nuel Pharr Davis and, in 1970, by that of William Marshall, published in America. Twenty years after Davis's biography, in 1976, Ashley Robert published another. Both of these latter works were largely based on the same information used by Robinson and Davis, and they used the same apocryphal stories. In 1974, however, Norman Page edited the very useful and informative *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, a collection of, amongst other things, reviews of his novels. It was not until 1991, in the new climate of revelation and re-evaluation in academic circles, that Peters's fully rounded biography was published.

From the 1980's, academic interest in Collins has grown considerably, notably with Sue Lonoff's *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers* in 1982, Audrey Peterson's *Victorian Masters of Mystery* in 1984, Jenny Bourne Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and 19th Century Psychology*, and Philip O'Neill's *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety,* both published in 1988. Interest has continued into the 1990's with a collection of extremely useful contemporary critical essays edited by Lyn Pykett in Britain, and with Lillian Nayder's work in America. Lillian Nayder's book, though it does touch briefly upon two of Collins's original plays (*Black and White* and *The Frozen Deep*) in the final chapter, "The Noncanonical Collins", makes no assessment of the plays created from his novels. Most recently, and most revealing for the Collins scholar, has been the publication of his letters in two volumes, edited by William Baker and William M. Clarke.

In recent decades, there has also been a close re-examination of Victorian theatre and Victorian dramatic literature, by scholars such as Russell Jackson, Anthony Jenkins, George Rowell, Tracy Davis, Martin Meisel, and, most prolifically, Michael Booth, with various collections of Victorian plays also being published. Melodrama itself is becoming a popular topic for re-examination. We have seen *Hiss the Villain*, a collection of plays edited by Booth and published in 1964; *Nineteenth Century Plays* edited by George Rowell in 1972; *The Magistrate and other 19th Century Plays,* also edited by Booth in 1974; *The Lights O' London and Other Victorian Plays*, a collection of fairly obscure works edited by Booth and published in 1995; and most recently, *Female Playwrights of the*

*Nineteenth Century,* edited by Adrienne Scullion and published in 1996. Important for the theatre scholar is Booth's collection of *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre* published in 1979. Also touching upon the subject of melodrama, in a larger sense and not specifically in terms of the theatre, we have seen Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess* published in 1976, and Elaine Hadley's *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885*, published in 1995.

No one, however, in this more probing observation both of Victorian Theatre and of Wilkie Collins himself, has closely examined Collins the playwright, not since 1972 and an unpublished thesis entitled *Wilkie Collins: From Novel to Play* submitted for the degree of PhD at Case Western University, by Barbara Brashear. In this thesis Ms Brashear closely examines the plays adapted from the novels, and analyses the problems he encountered adapting the same. It is her conclusion that "the play adaptations, though well organised and skilfully arranged, do not compare in quality with their originals".[2] This is a perfectly valid conclusion on her part but this thesis intends to study both the plays adapted from the novels, and the original works, in a wider theatrical context. Collins's plays have been discussed in the various biographies, especially the more recent ones, in the context of his life and, superficially and briefly, in relation to the novels from which they were adapted. Some appendices of recently

---

2 Brashear, Barbara Ann, *Wilkie Collins: From Novel to Play*. Unpublished thesis, Case Western Reserve University, 1972, p. 133.

published editions of his novels (notably the Penguin edition of *Armadale*, edited by John Sutherland) discuss the plays, but mostly in synopsis form.

Collins's plays were widely reviewed by the major papers of the time, but two collections of reviews worth close examination are those by Henry Morley and Edward Dutton Cook. Henry Morley published *The Journal of a London Playgoer* covering the years 1851 to1866, a selection of his dramatic criticism from *The Examiner,* a Sunday weekly paper. Morley (1822-1894) was an educationist and humanist. As well as being Professor of English at University College London and Queen's College, he was a lecturer at King's College London in English Language and Literature. In addition, he also wrote for and helped edit Dickens's journals, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round.* Edward Dutton Cook, who collected his reviews together for his book, *Nights at the Play,* covering 1868 to1883, was a theatrical reviewer for *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *The World* newspaper. Both these reviewers are useful as moral, middle class, representatives of Victorian opinion.

The movement of theatrical literature in the Victorian Age was from gothic romance, to high melodrama, to the more intimate plays of the 1890's. Some of the greatest influences on later playwrights, such as Oscar Wilde, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero, were those of the dramatist Tom Robertson, of Charles Fechter by his style of acting, and to some extent, Wilkie Collins. Just as we might ask how much Charles Dickens was a social reformer or merely following the trends of the time, we may ask how much Collins was an influence on dramatic progression, or a follower of theatrical dramatic trends. But if

Robertson was an influence in his creation of a more subdued style of theatrical writing, surely Collins provided, to a certain extent, a similar influence. Pinero, the first dramatist to be knighted in 1909, appeared in *Miss Gwilt*, in his first London role as a young actor, and remained a good friend throughout Collins's life.

Playwriting was very close to Collins's heart, and he had a desire to see the drama restored to literature, a passion which he shared with several other prominent Victorian novelists and writers, including Dickens. If there is to be a revival of interest in Victorian dramatic literature, and concurrently a revival of interest in Wilkie Collins, then surely Wilkie Collins the dramatist must be assessed critically, both in his historical context, and through analysis of the plays individually. Collins was one of the few well-known novelists of his time *still widely read and in print today* who wrote consistently for the stage, although of course Charles Reade and Mrs Braddon, both popular novelists at the time, also wrote for the stage. Collins also had an influence on the progression of the dramatic literature in his day.

Collins was very much torn between writing for the theatre and writing novels. He believed that he could do both, and it must be stated that he was moderately successful in his dramatic ventures. Collins loved the theatre passionately, and wanted to introduce his own style of writing to the English stage, a style much influenced by the French stage, which he knew very well. Collins enjoyed the theatre and everything about it from an early age, though he was not outstanding as an actor, or in his public readings in later life. Contemporary

comments on his public readings include that of Georgina Hogarth, Dickens's sister-in-law: "I cannot imagine that he is fitted for the part in any way – nor can I conceive how his books could bear being cut up into *portions* for reading – they seem to me to depend so entirely upon the interest and excitement of the *whole plot*".[3] Percy Fitzgerald, also a close friend of Dickens, attending Collins's public "try-out" for a subsequent American tour, stated that the reading was "singularly tame … clever man as he was, the impression he produced was that of all things in the world he had selected the one for which he was least fitted".[4] The reviewers concurred, or at least gave him good advice: "We should counsel him to adopt the tone and method of a lecturer, which almost anyone can acquire, rather than those of an actor, which lie beyond his reach".[5]

Some of the more barbed comments about his readings, however, should be taken with a pinch of salt, considering they were made by mutual friends of both Collins and Dickens, partisan to the undoubted talent of the latter. The actor Frank Archer was kinder; he thought that Collins "lacked the physique and varied gifts for a public reader, but what he did I thought was earnest and impressive".[6]

There is no doubt that Wilkie Collins had an influence on the following generations of mystery writers, from Conan Doyle through to P.D. James. Dorothy Sayers studied him closely enough to attempt a biography of him, which

---

[3] Peters, Catherine. *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1991, p. 345.
[4] Ibid., p. 346.
[5] Ibid., p. 346.
[6] Archer, Frank. *An Actor's Notebooks.* London: Stanley Paul and Company, 1912, p. 162.

unfortunately she never completed. She states, "It is not too much to say that without ... particularly ... Collins, the English novel of intrigue would either never have developed at all, or would have developed much later and upon much narrower and more Gothic lines. In particular, the modern English detective story could never have risen to its present position of international supremacy".[7]

The criticism is often made of the sensation novel that character is sacrificed to plot. As minutely plotted as Collins's novels were, the author who could draw Marian Halcombe, Magdalen Vanstone or Mercy Merrick was clearly a fine creator of character. Norman Page, in *The Critical Heritage*, sums up the prevailing view of Collins the novelist between his death and his recent reassessment: "The position of Mr Wilkie Collins in literature was a very unusual one. He was an extremely popular writer – deservedly popular, as we think – who was not very highly esteemed".[8] We now know, although we may critically view his later novels with our contemporary eyes, that Collins was popular to the end of his life; "The view that he slipped into obscurity, forgotten by readers and critics alike, is quite unacceptable … there is no shortage of evidence that he enjoyed a continuing popularity during the 1870's and 80's".[9]

Collins had strong views about the writing of a play; giving advice to a friend many years later, he stated, "When you have taken the *idea* of the story, you

---

[7] Sayers, Dorothy. *Wilkie Collins – A Critical and Biographical Study.*(manuscript). Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College Library, Wheaton, Illinois, p. 83.
[8] Page, Norman, ed. *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 249.
[9] Ibid., p. 23.

have taken all that the novel can give to the play".[10] He was a great fan of French literature, and French theatre, and was very knowledgeable on both. He believed in the theory of the *pièce bien fait*, or "well made play": the art of telling a story to maximum effect in specifically theatrical terms. His own plays take this form, and in the case of both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, he certainly followed his own advice, and took only the idea of the story, radically altering both of these tremendously popular novels for the stage. Frank Archer recollects a late conversation with Collins in 1887: "In speaking of the novelist's and the dramatist's art, he held that they were absolutely distinct, and approached from different sides entirely. He instanced the different treatment of his own "Woman in White" in novel and play".[11]

With few exceptions, Collins's plays were, if not always financially successful, at least critically so. Reviewers of his plays generally used the same sort of language as those of his early books: that he was a writer of great promise. Whether or not he fulfilled that promise can only really be seen when looking at his plays from a longer perspective. In the context of his times, Collins's plays were often revolutionary. Norman Page calls *The New Magdalen* "even more effective when it was converted into a play than as a novel, and, as a play, the most successful of his contributions to stage literature".[12]

Collins was the son of William Collins, the eminent Victorian landscape and portrait painter, and Harriet Geddes Collins. Collins grew up in a painter's

---

[10] Peters, p. 239.
[11] Archer, p. 301.
[12] Page, p. 248.

household, where he met, among others, Constable, Linnell, and David Wilkie, who was his godfather, and who gave him the name he was to adopt as an adult. This association with painters continued with his own generation. His brother Charles Alston Collins's artistic work was closely associated with that of the Pre-Raphaelites – Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais were close friends, and Collins was also well acquainted with Augustus Egg, who later introduced him to Dickens, one of the most important meetings of his career.

During his father's lifetime Collins had his first short story published. It was becoming obvious that writing was his passion, and could become his vocation, even though his father first found him a job in commerce (which Collins hated), then as a student of law. The study of law, at least, was extremely useful to him when he came to write. There are many legal niceties in a large number of his novels. Either he knew the intricacies of the law himself, or, if he did not, he frequently consulted other lawyers in order to get things exactly right.

William Collins, realising his eldest son had a talent for writing, expressed the hope that his son might write his memoirs. At the time of his father's death in 1847 Collins was already at work on his second novel (his first novel, *Iolani, or Tahiti As It Was*, recently published for the first time in 1999, had already been rejected for publication). He dutifully put aside his second novel to write his father's biography. The writing of his father's memoirs was a very shrewd and beneficial move for him. As an unpublished novelist and occasional journalist, he was sure of at least getting this book published. Upon publication in 1848 the book was well received, and well reviewed. With his next book (the one he had

set aside), the bizarre but wonderful 'gothic romance"'(written in imitation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, novelist and dramatist) *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome*, published in 1850, his entry into the world of literature was assured. Strange as this book may seem to us today, it was again well-reviewed, Wilkie Collins was looked upon as a young writer of great promise, and his career as a writer was well and truly on its way.

The theatre which saw the greatest number of Collins's professionally produced plays was The Olympic Theatre, located at 6-10 Wych Street off the Strand. This theatre opened 18 September 1806, and was ultimately demolished for the construction of the Aldwych Theatre in 1904. The most successful management was in the 1830's under the eminent actress Madame Vestris and her husband, the popular actor and comedian, Charles Mathews. This was some twenty years before Collins first put a play on the stage. After her management there were several successive proprietors lasting a few years at a time. Like most theatres, the Olympic had its own "house style", which rejected the strong melodrama so popular with other "minor" theatres. Madame Vestris's legacy to the Olympic was to make it a fashionable place to go for the middle class, although the area of Wych Street was decidedly shady. Actor Alfred Wigan carried this forward from 1853-1857, running the theatre under what Michael Booth calls a "well-bred management".[13]

Collins had six plays produced at the Olympic, under various managements. The first was also his first professional production, *The*

---

[13] Booth, Michael. *Theatre in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 9.

*Lighthouse*, in 1857, under the management of the actor, Frederick Thomas Robson. The second was under the same management, *The Red Vial* in 1858. The next, another originally amateur production (like *The Lighthouse*), was *The Frozen Deep* in 1866 under Horace Wigan, brother of the more famous actor Alfred Wigan. Finally, three of Collins's most popular plays (all adapted from his novels) were produced at the Olympic in the 1870's: *The Woman in White* in 1871, under William Henry Liston, *The New Magdalen* in 1873, under the actress Ada Cavendish, and *The Moonstone* in 1877, under the actor Henry Neville. Collins also had his play, *Man and Wife*, produced at the Prince of Wales Theatre under the management of Squire and Marie Bancroft. Many of these producer/actors were also close personal friends of Collins, as he had many friends in theatrical circles.

Collins's career as a playwright spans the period from 1854 to 1883, but even after his final professional production in 1883, that of his original play *Rank and Riches*, he was still planning for the stage. *The Evil Genius*, written simultaneously as play and novel, was given a copyright performance in 1885. Sadly for Collins the play was never produced, both because *Rank and Riches* had been a theatrical disaster, and also because theatrical managements were still not ready to present the character of a divorced woman on stage. Had he lived only ten years longer it might have been accepted, and he would have seen many similar subjects presented in the theatre, for, as Frank Rahill states in *The World of Melodrama*, "The hussy was on the way to becoming the heroine in melodrama of

the declining years of the nineteenth century, and the villain was becoming a kind of hero".[14]

It is important to study the development of the theatre in the nineteenth century in order to trace Collins's influence on the development of dramatic literature during the Victorian era, and this is the subject that the next chapter will explore.

14 Rahill, Frank. *The World of Melodrama*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967, p. 106.

# CHAPTER TWO

# VICTORIAN THEATRE

Victorian theatre is perceived today as anything from mildly laughable to ludicrous; at worst it is reviled. The Victorian theatrical tradition is blamed by current theatre practitioners for many perceived "ills" in theatre today. Yet the importance of Victorian theatrical practices and traditions is coming to be recognised in academic circles as the foundation upon which the theatre of today rests. This fact cannot be overlooked, or indeed overstressed. Allardyce Nicoll, for example, states in his *History of Late Nineteenth Century Theatre, 1850-1900*, "in this period were born and established the conventions and conditions of our own stage".[1] Also, in *Nineteenth Century British Theatre* Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson wrote, "As we increasingly perceive that the roots of much modern drama are to be found in the experiments of the 19th century stage, it is certain that the disparagement of the period cannot last".[2]

Indeed, the Victorian age, for better or worse, is the foundation of our modern civilisation. Though we saw many changes in the twentieth century, and many things previous generations could not conceive of (cars, flight, telephones, computers, men in space; the list is extensive), yet, in the Victorian Age, people went through a similar period of radical change and advancement, but to an even greater degree. Throughout the twentieth century, especially after the First World War, technological advances came steadily and are still ever-increasing; but, in the nineteenth century, ways of life disappeared rapidly and forever, with the inexorable progress of the industrial revolution. The social problems of inner

---

[1] Nicoll, Allardyce. *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946, p. viii.
[2] Richards, Kenneth & Thomson, Peter, eds. *Nineteenth Century British Theatre*. London: Metheun & Company, 1971, page vi.

cities which we have with us today were born then: slums, violence, over-crowding, high unemployment, and seemingly inescapable poverty which passes on from one generation to the next. However, the technology we have today would not have been possible, nor would the general quality of life, health care, and the move towards a classless society have occurred, without the industrial and scientific advances of the Victorian age and the wealth these generated.

Wilkie Collins was writing at a time when the theatre was in a state of flux, and in the period between the date of his first play in 1850 (the amateur performance of *A Court Duel*, a translation from a French piece) and his last professionally produced play, *Rank & Riches*, in 1883, many great changes occurred in the theatrical world. It has been said that Victorian theatre produced no lasting dramatic literature of any worth until the last decade of the century with the works of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero; although even the latter two are not often performed today. Two possible mid-century exceptions are the plays of Dion Bouccicault and Tom Robertson, both infrequently produced on the modern stage. Within the last twenty years or so we have begun to see a "revival" of Victorian pieces on the London stage; indeed, in recent years there have been a number of Victorian productions including such plays as *Caste* by Tom Robertson, *The Case of Rebellious Susan* by Henry Arthur Jones, and most recently, *Money* by Bulwer-Lytton. Even the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company have been known to produce the odd Victorian piece. But this literature is not really taken seriously; it is either an historical experiment, or viewed as light relief.

But if the literary quality of dramatic writing in the 1890's was an improvement over the writing of the early and mid-Victorian periods, the later playwrights owed a debt to their predecessors. The perception remains, however, that mid-Victorian plays, and specifically melodrama, could not be performed today without unintentionally amusing a contemporary audience, or at worst, driving them to sleep. Victorian plays are sometimes even staged solely for laughs, as in the case of a production of *Lady Audley's Secret* at the Lyric, Hammersmith in the 1990s. But the question remains, why are Victorian plays considered anachronistic or laughable? As Carol Hanberry McKay asks, "was there an essential quality of the era that was inexpressible in the form of significant drama"?[3] In an age that produced arguably some of the greatest writers of the English novel, why was there no significant contemporary drama?

To approach this question, several factors must be examined: Victorian attitudes towards playgoing, the general state and health of Victorian theatre, the structure of and changes to the theatrical system, and the adequacy of remuneration for those active in the theatre. Above all we must keep in mind that this was truly the last era in which theatre was popular with, and meant a good night out for, everyone from every class and walk of life. In the words of Michael Booth, "there is, indeed, no need to be apologetic about it: one can advance and substantiate considerable claims for the nineteenth century drama ... that drama

---

[3] McKay, Carol Hanberry, *Dramatic Dickens.* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988, p. 1.

offered for the last time in English history entertainment for all classes of society, a truly popular drama in both senses of the word."[4]

Since the restoration of Charles II in 1660, there had existed only two theatres permitted to perform what was called the "legitimate drama", i.e. farce, comedy and tragedy. Two of the courtiers of Charles II were granted licences to produce dramatic works in two "patent theatres". These licences were eventually sold on, and ultimately rested in what came to be known as the two "patent" houses: Covent Garden and Drury Lane. In the summer, the Haymarket was permitted to perform legitimate drama to make up for the lack of productions during the quiet summer months when the patent houses were closed. And yet, even from the early part of the nineteenth century, there were several other London theatres (not only in the theatre district or "West End") which managed, for the most part, to get around these restrictions on performing drama by adding a few songs and/or musical interludes into a play, sometimes just striking a chord or two at regular intervals. The play was not therefore considered "legitimate drama", but a "burletta". This trend continued until the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, when, as a result of many years of lobbying by the "minors", the monopoly of the Patents was ended.

Even before the Theatres Regulation Act, however, there was a boom in the construction of theatres in London during the first half of the nineteenth century and up to the deregulation, and then again from 1860 onwards. Theatre construction did not take place on any great scale immediately after the act,

---

[4] Booth, Michael, ed. *The Magistrate and other Nineteenth Century Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. vii.

because the economy at the time was depressed. One of the main reasons behind all this theatre construction was a notable effect of the industrial revolution: the growing urbanisation of society, which translated in entertainment terms into "theatrical manifestation of great social changes (...) that as a matter of course produced significant changes in the composition of audiences".[5] During the course of the century, the population of London increased (in round numbers) from 900,000 in 1801, to 3,000,000 in 1851, and finally to 6,000,000 in 1901. Therefore, merely in terms of numbers, the potential audience for theatre greatly increased; naturally theatre managers wanted to take advantage of this fact. In terms of spatial size, London was growing as well, so, as building continued, theatres began to be constructed outside of the traditional West End, i.e. on the south (Surrey) side of the river, and in the populous East End. The new suburbs, and new railways to bring people "into town", also had an effect in greatly increasing potential audiences.

The composition of these enlarged theatre audiences, however, is a more complicated matter. It is obvious from contemporary accounts that, during the first half to two-thirds of the nineteenth century, "going to the theatre" was indeed a popular pastime among most classes of society including the Queen herself. Some historians claim that only in the latter part of the century did a new, respectable, middle-class audience "come back to" the theatre, after a long absence during the early and middle periods of the century. Yet theatre-going was popular before this with the middle classes, particularly under the managements of

---

[5] Booth, Michael. *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 3.

Madame Vestris at the Olympic in 1831; of the well-respected and much-loved William Charles Macready at Covent Garden from 1837, and then Drury Lane from 1841; and of the respectable Charles Kean at the Princess's from 1850-1859, to name just three among many. Michael Booth censures theatre historians for making the presumption that the middle classes avoided the theatre mid-century, calling it "a serious over-simplification to picture the nineteenth-century theatre ... as climbing slowly out of a swamp of mob rule and working-class domination in the earlier part of the century to reach an eminence of profound Victorian decorum and middle-class and fashionable patronage of the theatre".[6]

It is true that for moral and/or religious reasons, a percentage of the middle class population would not go near a theatre. In many cases, this arose more from an objection to the building as to the play, since many people attended playreadings in civic halls and other public buildings, a very popular entertainment with middle class audiences. Theatres and their neighbourhoods were usually the haunt of prostitutes. In the early part of the century, prostitutes even attempted to ply their trade within the theatres, but this was brought to an end when Macready took the lead and made a concerted effort to rid the building of them (although they still lingered outside well into the century). Other theatre managers followed suit and banished prostitutes from their premises, thereby removing a major middle class objection.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, theatre managements began to try to entice a strictly middle-class audience to the theatre, rather than the mix of

---

[6] Ibid., p. 9.

classes familiar in normal audiences. One obvious case is the management of actor-managers Marie Wilton (later Marie Bancroft) and Squire Bancroft at the Prince of Wales beginning in 1865. Formerly this theatre was known as the Queen's (nicknamed "the Dusthole"), and was located in an insalubrious part of town just off Tottenham Court Road. Marie Wilton, a young and ambitious actress, acquired the lease of the site and set about refurbishing the theatre. She created an environment which would appeal specifically to a middle-class audience, even placing white anti-macassars on the backs of the stall chairs. As well as changing the outward appearance and environment of the theatre, she (eventually with her husband, Squire Bancroft) created a new style of drama, calculated to appeal uniquely to a middle-class audience. As a result, "Cup and Saucer Drama" was born. Specific examples of this type of drama include plays by the dramatist most closely connected with the Bancrofts, T. W. Robertson. His plays, most of them immensely popular at the time, include *Caste* in 1865, *Society* in 1867 and *M.P.* in 1870.

It is clearly evident that the middle class had never really left the theatre. At the same time, it is true that, as the century progressed, the working class was increasingly driven out of the theatres, especially from the West End, which became increasingly more fashionable, select, and hence prohibitively more expensive towards the latter part of the century.

During the course of the century, leisure time for all workers, including members of the working class, steadily increased as the industrial revolution progressed. Although there were many social ills spawned by the Industrial

Revolution (too numerous to mention here) which only slowly became evident, and were only slowly addressed, a major benefit for the working class was shorter working hours.

In the early 1900's, plays would begin at six o'clock in the evening, with half price admission at nine when many people would be finishing work for the day and would then sometimes run until midnight, with several items on the bill. Towards the latter part of the century, starting times became later and later, progressively to seven o'clock, then eventually to eight or half past eight. At the same time, working hours were getting shorter, but this was also in part owing to the later dinner hour of the middle and upper classes, and the growth in popularity of the new restaurants. As a result, the length of the evening and number of pieces on the bill were shortened, and half price admission was abolished.

Also during the nineteenth century, society in general, and members of the working class in particular (at least those that were in steady work), achieved ever greater affluence. Thus we have "theatres addressing themselves specifically to working class aspirations and treating their audience with respect ... one of the more attractive features of Victorian cultural life".[7] There are many contemporary accounts of nights out at the theatre, be it in the West End, or a popular East End theatre like the Britannia in Hoxton, and the great enjoyment that the working class derived from theatre-going. It must be remembered that "the theatre was for many working-class people the only escape - apart from the public house - from a drab and laborious life".[8] Charles Dickens, an avid theatre-goer and

---

[7] Jackson, Russell, *Victorian Theatre*. London: A&C Black (Publishers) Limited, 1989, p.13.
[8] Ibid., p. 10.

amateur actor for many years, defended the working class and their right to enjoy theatre in the first number of *Household Words* on 30 March 1850. In an article entitled 'Amusements of the People', he wrote, "For we do consider the hours of idleness passed by this class of society as so much gain to society at large, and we do not join in a whimsical sort of lamentation that is generally made over them, when they are found to be unoccupied".[9]

Yet the working class were to be, as the century progressed, slowly squeezed out of the "fashionable" West End theatres and further back into their own territory (generally the East End), and to the form of entertainment which is most closely associated with them: the Music Hall. The second boom in theatre building after 1860 meant that more theatres were being built to cater specifically for middle-class audiences; "The trend was emphatically towards smaller, more comfortably appointed and socially exclusive theatres".[10] This meant that any new theatres built were not likely to actively cultivate the working class audience. Theatre attendance was made difficult in a number of ways, including the ticketing procedures such as booking in advance at the middle-class libraries, as opposed to turning up at the door; separate entrances for the cheaper seats from those for members of the audience holding stall or dress circle tickets; and the questionable comfort of the seats: "Pains were taken in most theatres to segregate the classes of patron from the moment they came to buy a ticket".[11]

---

[9] Ibid., p. 27.
[10] Ibid., p 11.
[11] Ibid., p. 12.

This gradual elimination of the working class from the West End was most noticeably apparent in the slow removal of "the pit", which was the area of the auditorium which we know as the stalls. Seating in the pit consisted of rows of benches, and was designated as general admission. To make way for the more expensive and upholstered chairs of the stalls, pit seats were gradually forced farther and farther back under the overhang of the dress circle. In consequence, "the pit" was pushed out of its very existence. This left a gap where the loyal theatre-goer used to sit. Fashionable audiences, the eminent theatre critic Clement Scott argued, arrived late, talked during the play, and only came to see and be seen. Those who truly cared about the drama found the action and their concentration interrupted by latecomers and the chattering in the audience, behaviour that would also understandably upset an actor's performance.

Dickens describes just this behaviour in a humorous passage in *David Copperfield.* David and his friends, after a rather drunken dinner party when all of them (especially David: "I was very pale in the looking glass; my eyes had a vacant appearance; and my hair - only my hair, nothing else - looked drunk"[12]) are rather the worse for wear, decide to go to the theatre. To David's chagrin, he meets Agnes, whose friends have taken her there on a visit to London: "'Agnes! I said thickly, 'Lorblessmer, Agnes!' 'Hush! Pray!' she answered, I could not conceive why. 'You disturb the company. Look at the stage!'"[13]

In addition, the pit seats comprised some of the cheapest seats in the house, whilst the new stalls were priced out of reach of those who used to occupy the

---

[12] Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p 421.
[13] Ibid., page 422.

space. This was not the first incidence of controversy over seating. After the rebuilding of Covent Garden in 1809, a new pricing structure was introduced. However, audiences (most especially pit and gallery audiences) were so outraged that they disrupted the performances night after night until prices were again reduced. These disturbances were known as the "Old Price Riots". The "riots" ran for sixty-seven nights, after which time the management lowered prices to their original charge. In addition, these riots were not just about pricing but alterations to the seating caused by the rebuilding of the theatre as documented by Elaine Hadley in *Melodramatic Tactics*: the amendments to the gallery meant that "most of these theatregoers … could neither see nor hear the performance." [14]

In 1875, however, although the disappearance of the pit raised an outcry in the respectable press on behalf of those who attended the pit, managements stood firm and the pit gradually disappeared. In defence of the pit, and those who frequented it, Clement Scott, in an article for *The 'Era' Almanack* in 1875, wrote:

"People who go to the pit, who fight for the first row, and who linger affectionately at the doors long before they open, show by their own conduct what extreme interest they take in the play. They are the true playgoers".[15] The stalls being more expensive, patrons of the theatre could find themselves paying at least three times the price of a former pit seat. In consequence most West End theatre tickets were priced out of reach of most working class patrons, with the exception of the upper galleries, known as "the gods". Public outcry includes this diatribe by

---

[14] Hadley, Elaine. *Melodramatic Tactics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.
[15] Jackson, p. 50.

Frederick Wedmore, writing in *The Academy* in 1880: "... that means, of necessity, to most of the best lovers of the drama, less frequent visits to the theatre - it may mean almost the extinction of the older and more critical class of playgoer. It means that playgoing, instead of being a general amusement and a method of cultivation, may be but a costly indulgence for those who have richly dined".[16]

Clearly there were problems for managements who tried to attract only middle-class audiences to their theatres. Many managements were accused of neglecting the "art" of theatre for mere profit; Clement Scott had this to say about the growing commercialisation of the theatre: "Had not the voice of the pit been stifled ... we should not have found, as now, a kind of civil war being waged in all matters of theatrical interest, - on the one side those who love the art, on the other [those] who view it merely as a commercial speculation".[17]

However, though they may have been forced from the pit and high up into "the gods", there are many accounts of the working class still attending the more "popular" kinds of theatre, including melodrama, burlesque, and old favourites like Shakespeare, as opposed to the new "modern" drama of playwrights like Ibsen, well up to the end of the century. As Booth noted, "even when the theatre was more soberly attended in conformity with general social trends, and certainly more lavishly patronised by the middle class, the working class by no means disappeared from the theatre, even from the West End. ... After all, even in central

---

[16] Ibid., p. 63.
[17] Ibid., p. 52.

London in the 1890's, 80% of the resident population was working-class. It would have been surprising if none of them went to the theatre".[18]

Obviously, theatre was directly affected by the state of the economy, and from about 1815 through to the early 1860's, there were several periods of slump and boom as a consequence of the industrial revolution. The economic state of the theatre was directly affected by a series of bad harvests before 1842 and a severe trade depression during the middle of the century, combined with the Afghan War in 1839 and the Crimean War in 1854-56. These conditions were exacerbated by the potato famine in Ireland in 1845 and the cotton famine in Lancaster in 1862. The lowest period in the economy is generally considered to be the years 1839 to 1843, and the decade of the 1840's is often referred to as "the hungry forties". This was a time of political upheaval, with the newly organised working class gaining a voice in politics through groups such as the Chartists. This period of upheaval is reflected in the mid-century literature of Mrs. Gaskell with *Mary Barton* and *North and South,* and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil.*

Therefore, although the patent theatres lost their monopoly in 1843 and the performance of drama was opened up to greater competition, the times were not exactly conducive to a revolution in the theatre. During economic slumps, managements usually lowered prices in order to attract audiences, and most of all, to attract the new working class audience. It was only as the century progressed and became more prosperous overall, that, for just about every class, prices began to rise (resulting in the pricing of the working class out of the West End as

---

[18] Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, pp. 9-10.

discussed above), as people began to have more money and more leisure time for "luxuries" like the theatre. The Bancrofts, at the Prince of Wales, were in the right place, at the right time. By the last third of the century, real wages rose whilst the cost of living declined, as material profits soared ever higher, and the cost of cheap imported goods plummeted.

The new "technology", brought on by the new industries, also had its effect in the world of theatre. Technological advancements made during the period were great, once changes to the structure of the stage were made. The first important change, which began early in the century, was that the forestage, which used to jut out into the pit and was surrounded by boxes, gradually shortened, until the entire stage was situated behind the proscenium arch creating the "picture frame" effect as we know it today. This, in addition to pricing policies and class consciousness, in some measure had an effect on the creation of the stalls and the disappearance of the pit described above.

As the stage retreated behind the proscenium arch, sets and the "dressing" of the stage (i.e. props and furniture) became much more realistic. Where once flat scenery made up of scenes painted onto cloth or canvas was lowered or slid into place (usually in full view of the audience), sets gradually began to incorporate real furniture, actual props such as cups and saucers, and more realistic exits and entrances from the wings (i.e. actual doors or windows built into the set). Between acts, a drop curtain covered the stage, thus hiding any scene changes. House lights were kept low, or completely off to darken the auditorium during performance, although initially this particular move was very unpopular. In

time, the "box set" we know today came into existence. Some progressive managements used realistic sets, in keeping with the types of plays performed there. A prime example is provided by the Bancrofts' management of the Prince of Wales, and later at the Haymarket. The plays produced reflected middle-class life in general. In response, a more middle-class audience became dedicated theatre-goers.

Early in the century, the stage and the house were lit by candles or oil lamps. Apart from the alarming fire hazards, such lighting had little pictorial effect on the plays performed. Eventually, gas became popular, allowing huge advances in lighting and lighting design, notably the creation of "limelight", so that for the first time in the theatre a beam of light could also be coloured, by means of coloured glass or silk placed in front of the beam. While gas was less dangerous than the open flames of candles or lamps, there was still some danger of conflagration, notably from the intense heat produced by the gas lamps and jets. Only very late in the period did theatres begin to experiment with electricity, generally after 1880. It is noteworthy that all of the technological change occurred within two generations. These advancements also had an effect on the prevalent acting style by encouraging "the growth of an intimate and natural acting style well suited to the quieter domesticity, more restrained writing and subtler portrayal of serious and comic drama alike",[19] exemplified by, among others, the Bancrofts.

A Victorian theatre was run by a manager, who paid ground rent to the owner of the building. The manager bore the entire financial responsibility for the

---

[19] Booth, Michael. *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979, p. 32.

building and the productions, but also reaped the profit, if any. Although there were some theatres run by non-actors, usually business speculators or syndicates looking to make a profit, the most common form of management was under an Actor-Manager. The actor-manager is a uniquely Victorian phenomenon, although actor-managers still existed into the 1930's. Actor-managers took charge of a theatre artistically and administratively not just to attempt to make a profit, but most often because it was a way of rising above the rest of the field and advancing one's career in an increasingly crowded profession. Over the course of the century, theatrical managements could (and did) amass fortunes; throughout their career the Bancrofts represented a great success story.

However, several managers also went bankrupt. William Charles Macready, Charles Kean and Henry Irving, all of them notable and highly respected actor-managers, lost large amounts of money in their management of various theatres, ranging from the smaller Princess's (Charles Kean) to the large patent houses, although in the case of the latter it is fair to say that Drury Lane and Covent Garden rarely made a profit. Henry Irving, for example, although the first actor to be knighted and at the top of his profession, was destitute at the end of his life - his last attempt at management was that of the Lyceum Theatre, which terminated with a catastrophic loss at the box office, compounded by a disastrous fire. As a result, he was forced to turn over the management to a syndicate, which in turn failed. He died, nearly penniless, in 1905 touring the provinces.

Although financially theatrical management could be a very unstable proposition, many considered it worth the risk to have such tight artistic control,

either to ensure that there was always a major part for them in a production, or to give their career some measure of stability. Not every actor-manager insisted on the best parts for him or herself every time. It is worth mentioning, however, that Marie Wilton started her venture at the Prince of Wales because she was tired of playing boys in the popular burlesques of the time, parts which necessitated showing her legs, a risqué situation which she did not want to continue for too long. She did do it well, however, as this description of her by Dickens, writing to John Forster in December of 1858, shows:

> I really wish you would go to see *The Maid and the Magpie* burlesque … There is the strangest thing in it that ever I have seen on the stage – the boy, Pippo, by Miss Wilton. While it is astonishingly impudent (must be, or it couldn't be done at all), it is so stupendously like a boy, and unlike a woman, that it is perfectly free from offence. I have never seen such a thing. … yet the manner, the appearance, the levity, impulse and spirits of it are so exactly like a boy, that you cannot think of anything like her sex in association with it. I never have seen such a curious thing, and the girl's talent is unchallengeable. I call her the cleverest girl I have ever seen on the stage in my time, and the most singularly original. [20]

The only way she saw to escape those roles and play what she really wanted to play, comedy, was management, and she was fortunate enough to find financial backing. Neither she nor her husband set out to create a revolution in the theatre; what transpired came from the natural desire to play the parts they felt were best suited to them. Nor did they always take the lead roles. Robertson's plays were in any case more ensemble pieces than star vehicles.

There were numerous managements by various actors and even actresses between 1830 and the end of the century. Some of the more influential

---

[20] Donaldson, Frances. *The Actor Managers*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970, pp. 21-22.

managements during this period were under Macready at Drury Lane in 1841; the Bancrofts, as discussed above, both at the Prince of Wales and later the Haymarket; Charles Kean, son of the great actor Edmund Kean at the Princess's Theatre between 1850 and 1859; and Irving's ultimately ill-fated management of the Lyceum from 1878 to 1899. Whilst the Bancrofts are credited with attracting a greater middle-class audience to the theatre, and for creating a new style of theatre for the latter half of the century, the managements of Macready, Kean and Irving have more to do with the change of structure within the system, and the rise of the "director" which we know today.

The process of creating a piece of theatre in the mid-nineteenth century was quite a different process. The practice was pretty much standard throughout the theatrical world. Players were given only their own part to memorise, with perhaps a few cue lines, without seeing the rest of the script and with only a hazy notion of what the play was about. After all, if it was a standard melodrama, the form was so well-known and understood that it was easy to guess the plot. The actors then came together for one or two "rehearsals", which mainly consisted of blocking the movement and mumbling through the lines, often skimming over the long speeches in the interests of saving time. If it was a revival of a popular play, it would be assumed in any case that the piece was known by the actors.

Only the lead actors really took much leeway in interpreting their parts; supporting actors would be expected to know the basic plot, the lines and the movements of their part, and the character type such as "Walking Gentleman", "Heavy Woman", etc.. As long as his interpretation of the character and his stage

"business" (movement, gesture, etc.) didn't interfere with the leading parts, the actor was often, but not always, free to do what he liked. The rehearsal would usually be led by the stage manager, the actor-manager, or the prompter. Macready, Kean and Irving took some steps towards creating the role of the modern director, in that they oversaw all aspects of the rehearsal. Some authors took on the role of director in rehearsal of their plays, giving character interpretation to the actors as well as blocking movement.

In most instances, however, "stock" characters were portrayed on stage, types which would be familiar to Victorian audiences. Michael Booth points out this difference: "...whoever was in charge of rehearsals did not help the actor to develop a character or work with him toward a particular interpretation ... The Victorian Theatre did not possess such a thing as a governing idea of a play in the mind of one person [i.e. a director]".[21] In some cases, especially if it was a provincial tour of a West End show, supporting actors were asked to imitate exactly the original character interpretation. Russell Jackson relates a story told by the actor George Arliss, when he was just beginning his career in the early 1880s:

> He showed me the part I was to play next Monday; it was the leading juvenile in *Just in Time*, a long part written in long hand on innumerable sides of paper. On each page there were two or three phrases underlined in red ink. I asked what that meant, and he told me those were rounds of applause. The words thus underscored had to be spoken with such force as to compel the audience to respond.[22]

---

[21] Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, pp. 107-108.
[22] Jackson, p. 82.

Michael Booth also quotes Leopold Wagner on this subject. Wagner stated, "A new reading of a part will not be tolerated. The least attempt at originality might endanger an enthusiastic performer's engagement".[23]

The repertory system, where the offerings would change nightly with several items on the bill, was the system used by both provincial touring companies and the London theatres in the first half of the century. The items performed would most likely be well-known, popular plays, and each theatre would have quite

a large repertoire. Sometimes only one act of, for example, a Shakespeare play, would be performed. Even the Bancrofts, with their successful "new" plays, would only play them for short runs no matter how good the houses, so as to build up a large repertoire.

As a result, every actor would most likely be familiar with the play, or at least the type of character, and so the short, sometimes even non-existent rehearsal period was the normal course of events. Actors would spend much of their working lives in various companies playing similar types. Squire Bancroft, for example, played well over 100 parts in his early years touring the provinces and Ireland. And in an article by Robertson in *The Illustrated Times* in 1864, he explains the average work load of a "Leading Lady":

> ... what a weight of work, what worlds of words are piled up for the aspirant! ... A tragic actress must 'study' - that is learn by heart, as it is called, the text of the characters of Desdemona, Imogen, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, Constance, Miranda, Rosalind, Beatrice, Portia, Juliet, Hermione, the two Katherines of Padua and Aragon, Julia, Virginia, Belvidera, the ladies Teazle, Townley, and

---

[23] Booth, pp. 109-110.

> Randolph, Mistress Jane Shore, and a host of heroines of dramas such as Black-eyed Susan, Rachel Heywood, Miami, Cynthia, and the like ...[24]

Charles Kean, as well as being a conscientious actor-manager, was also well-known for his popular and "historically correct" productions of Shakespeare.

Contrary to popular opinion, Shakespeare was not cut up, with happy endings stuck on tragedies, by the Victorian theatrical practitioners; rather this was done by their predecessors in the Regency and Restoration periods. Shakespeare was "reclaimed" by the Victorians with the original texts restored. Whilst Trevor Nunn's hugely successful stage version of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* of 1980 offers us a very humorous portrait of the Crummles's *Romeo & Juliet*, what in fact most Victorian managers did, beginning with Macready, is lovingly restore text and characters to the adulterated Restoration performances. This reverence for Shakespeare as performed in his day, and for the writer as artist, educator, and historian, became a doctrine that has lasted a long time in the theatre.

But Kean was not only concerned with the archaeological aspects of performing Shakespeare. His productions were immensely popular due to the large scale upon which they were presented, and the spectacular scenic effects involved. He not only restored text, but added scenes which he felt Shakespeare should have put in. To cite one example, he added the triumphal entry of Henry V into London upon his return from France, in the play of that name; this involved an enormous cast of extras to cheer him, several horses, and a tremendous and

---

[24] Jackson, p. 114.

authentic scenic background. Kean enjoyed presenting large-scale spectacle, and not just in his Shakespearean productions.

The problem which faced Kean in presenting such large scale productions was the cost of scenery, costumes and dressing which could only be used for that particular production. It became more cost effective to run a production for as many nights as it could sell tickets, in order to break even on the original outlay, and begin to make a profit. Thus we have the move towards the long run which we know today, which began to spell the end for the repertory system.

A longer run was more profitable, practical, and absolutely necessary if the management were running a large company and expensive productions. But this did not apply only to large scale productions of Shakespeare. At the height of Victorian melodrama, the most popular form of drama, a great part of the attraction came from large-scale demonstrations in the form of spectacular train crashes, floods, and the usual dramatic devices which dogged the hero or heroine throughout the play until the triumph of good over evil. It is worth mentioning that the Victorians were pictorially minded, and liked their entertainment, whether in the theatre or in the picture gallery, to be highly visual.

The transformation from the repertory/stock system to the "long run" was also partly attributable to the availability of more realistic sets for each individual play, as opposed the old style painted flats/scenery which could be adapted for any number of plays. Costumes were increasingly geared to each specific play rather than using the same attire for a wide range of parts and plays. This again particularly applies to the Bancrofts and to Charles Kean.

In the provinces, not only did the repertory system give way to the long run, but provincial touring companies were gradually ousted by the London touring companies. In the early part of the century, the theatre regions were divided loosely into "circuits", which were covered by a number of regional companies. This structure was remarkably stable, operated on understandings between regional touring companies who rarely disturbed the hierarchy. This system not only provided the regions and large towns outside London with accessible theatre, but also provided an environment for a solid grounding in acting technique to the fledgling actor.

However, things were changing. The provincial companies were gradually replaced by London touring shows, with the original company travelling out from London. Surprisingly, these were more profitable than they may sound. For the most part, this new capability to tour successful London shows was due almost entirely to the new railways, which were able to transport entire casts, sets and costumes to the large regional towns and also bring audiences into those towns from the surrounding countryside.

For an actor, then, what it meant to have a career in the theatre changed dramatically over the course of the century. Under the stock system, the characters portrayed might be limited in type, but the actor could learn a large number of plays, and end up with a comprehensive knowledge of many parts. With the advent of the long run system, actors would accordingly have a limited range, and might play only a few parts in an entire career. There were proponents of both kinds of system; but the decline of the repertory system also led to the setting up

of national drama training early in the 1900's (The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1905 and The Central School of Speech and Drama in 1906). Whichever system one favoured, it was widely recognised as early as the 1870's that training of actors was needed due to the decline of repertory. And in 1882 an association was formed "with the view to raising education standards on stage"[25] which included Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Henry Morley, and Wilkie Collins among its members.

Setting aside the argument over training methods, two main improvements for the actor/actress were the significant increase in wages over the course of the century, and the slow but steady improvement in the actor's status in the eyes of society at large. When giving evidence to a Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations in 1866, Horace Wigan, manager of the Olympic Theatre, stated that salaries for actors increased by 30 - 50% over a generation.[26] For example, at the lower end of the scale, salaries would have increased from 30 shillings per week to £3 or £4 per week. Ever at the forefront of the revolution in theatre, Squire Bancroft could legitimately claim to have had a substantial influence on improving the actor's financial status, as he does here, in his autobiography written in 1909:

> In what were called 'the palmy days' of the drama ... salaries were lamentably small, and the rewards to which even eminent actors could aspire in former times were pitiful indeed. ... We may claim without arrogance to have been the first to effect a reform which should secure a proper reward for the labourious life and special gifts demanded of the actor, and make the stage a worthy career for refined and talented people. ... Mrs Stirling, when she played the

---

[25] Baker, Michael. *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*. London: Croom Helm Limited, 1978, p. 153.
[26] Jackson, p. 116.

> Marquise in our final revival of [*Caste*], received eight times the salary we had paid to the original representative of the character.[27]

This rise in salaries made a considerable difference in the lives of many actors. As is well documented, actors had, in most cases, to supply their own clothes, props, etc. for any production. These expenses came out of their salary, in addition to their food, lodging and travel. If an actor had a family to support, life could be even more difficult.

For actors working in the provinces, the main source of income was likely to be a "benefit". Benefit nights were particular evenings when one actor (if one of the main members of the troupe) or a group of actors (those playing only small parts grouped together) took the total box office income due to the company, after the management took its cut. Effectively, the rest of the cast worked for free on the night in order to support one particular actor or group of actors. They knew, however, that their turn would come to receive their own benefit night. A benefit night, though ensuring an income which might last a few months, did require a lot of hard work enticing audiences to the theatre. It was essential that the actor created his or her own publicity by printing handbills, personally distributing them, and exhibiting them as widely as possible in order to gain maximum profit.

From the top rungs of the profession, the actor-managers, to the smallest walk-on parts, acting was decidedly not an easy life. This was not aided by the fact that not only were acting and actors perceived as immoral, they were people in a profession riddled with loose morals. However, as a consequence in part of rising salaries, but, just as importantly, because of the growing middle class

---

[27] Ibid., p. 111.

audience for the theatre, by the end of the century acting began to be viewed as a respectable profession. This was an improvement on mid-century acting life; at that time, many famous actors, who did not come from parents who were themselves actors, were renounced by their own families for going upon the stage.

However, not only was Henry Irving knighted in 1895, but, invitations to his post-theatre receptions became sought after among the upper classes of society. By the turn of the century, young, middle-class men could consider going on to the stage without loss of respectability, and it even began to be a respectable option for middle-class daughters to go on stage, instead of becoming governesses or companions.

It remained more difficult for an actress to stop being perceived as a "loose woman"; women in the profession had to work very hard to appear as respectable ladies. Michael Booth states, "No matter how moral and hard-working the majority of actresses might be ... the public associated the life of an actress with a life of immoral and degenerate ease".[28] This perception of actresses could also be attributed to the fact that for many people in Victorian society the concept of a woman in a position of power and earning money was difficult to come to terms with.

This confusion was of course even more greatly pronounced if the woman were an actor-manager, as in the cases of Madame Vestris and Marie Wilton. These powerful and prominent women felt compelled to bend over backwards in order to appear respectable, and their attitudes went a long way towards changing

---

[28] Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 113.

public perceptions of women on stage. In 1885, Mrs Kendal was asked to read her paper, 'The Drama', at the Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. In her address she states, "Perhaps the most remarkable change that has come over the condition of the Drama is the fact that there is at last a recognised social position for the professional player".[29] Rather than quoting too extensively from theatrical biographies of the day, however, Jackson does point out that "The 'official' biographies and autobiographies often make successful actors seem unbearably stuffy and complacent ... Helen Faucit's resplendent womanly virtues shine numbingly through the biography by her husband, Sir Theodore Martin". [30]

What we find, then, in this period of change in the Victorian Theatre, is that there was an ever-growing middle-class audience, whilst the working class audiences was gradually squeezed out; great technological advances within a generation, from candles, to gas lamps, and finally to electricity; change in the theatrical system from repertory to the long run; and a general improvement in the wages and social position of the actor. All of these aspects resulted in greater literary quality of drama by the end of the century, although Wilde, Pinero and Jones could not have existed without the work that had gone before; "all late Victorian and Edwardian serious drama was fathered by the earlier melodrama. As sometimes happens in life, the intellectual middle class son despises his humble working class parents. But his parents they are, all the same".[31] How the

---

[29] Jackson, p. 131.
[30] Ibid., p. 84.
[31] Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*, p. 28.

drama itself progressed, and the position of the playwright, will be discussed in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER THREE

# VICTORIAN DRAMATIC LITERATURE

On turning to examine the dramatic literature of the period, we again encounter modern hostility at worst, or patronising amusement at best, towards the most popular and enduring form of dramatic literature in the Victorian era: melodrama. However, melodrama was not by any means the only form of popular and prolific entertainment during this period. Other types of entertainment included tragedy, comedy (ranging from the early comedies of the period, to the elegant and sophisticated drawing room comedies of Robertson at the Bancrofts' Prince of Wales), burlesque, opera, ballet, pantomime, hippodrama, and spectacle, which included circuses. An outing to Astley's, the home of spectacle, was always a popular pastime. Shakespeare, as mentioned above, was perennially popular with all classes of the theatre-going public.

In the early part of the century, dramatic literature written by well-known literary figures of the day, including the poets Coleridge (*Remorse*, 1813), Shelley (*The Cenci,* 1819) and Byron (*Marino Faleiro*, 1821), was modelled on playwriting of three centuries before. Admiring Shakespeare and his contemporaries as they understandably did, they attempted to write plays in a similar style, which inevitably involved writing in verse. However, this out-dated mode of writing was ill-suited to the modern issues with which playwrights found themselves increasingly confronted, and to the physical changes in form and structure which the playhouse had experienced up to the early nineteenth century. The style did not suit the tone of the times, nor did it suit the more contemporary styles of these authors; writers were too self-conscious in trying to emulate a style of playwriting that was, in effect, dead. These early tragedies are considered

unplayable today, much as they were at the time. The argument is that nineteenth century drama was bad because it had no connection with contemporary literature; in fact, those who were writing this early nineteenth century tragedy were really rather too concerned with producing "literature" and wrote with very little thought for the necessities and practicalities of staging.

Not since the early part of the century, with the exception of the poet Robert Browning, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and later, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (*Queen Mary* was staged in 1876 and *Becket* in 1893), had any well-respected, literary figures who are widely read, and still in print today, consistently written for the stage. This state of affairs continued until the last decade, with the notable exception of Wilkie Collins. Charles Reade and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, respected writers at the time, did write for the stage during the period. Browning wrote two plays; *Strafford* in 1837, and *A Blot on the Scutcheon* in 1843, both produced by Macready at Drury Lane. The latter play was much admired by Dickens, but neither did very well as a theatrical production. Dickens was so overwhelmed by *A Blot on the Scutcheon* that he liked to quote from it; after reading it, he said that "Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow".[1]

The background to these productions, and Dickens's part in it, sometimes as mediator between Macready and Browning, is a fascinating microcosmic history of literary dramatic progression. Dickens, along with others including the actor Charles Macready, John Forster, Robert Browning and George Henry Lewes,

---

[1] Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens*. London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1991, p. 409.

felt very strongly about "the great objective of making the English playhouse fit for a modern drama that would be a worthy descendant of the work of Shakespeare".[2] They saw in Browning "a man who might create a modern English drama of great poetic and theatrical power".[3]

A great debate ensued in literary magazines, about the merits of action versus poetic contemplation in theatre, a debate joined by, among others, John Henry Newman and G. H. Lewes. Through his close friendship with Macready, Dickens had some influence on him, in trying to affect the direction of stage literature. "Dickens played a leading role in the long, energetic attempt to reconnect the London stage with dramatic literature".[4] However, critics and practitioners alike were unhappy with the predilections of those attempting to write for the stage, who favoured contemplation over action.

Macready's diary is quoted at length in *Action, Character and Language: Dickens, His Contemporaries, and the Lure of the Stage* by James Redmond, in the collection of essays entitled *Dramatic Dickens*, edited by Carol Hanberry MacKay. The diary charts the progress of Macready's productions of Browning's plays. It also shows Macready's increasing frustration with "Browning's wilful use of dramatic language that would not stoop to lucidity".[5] From his initial cautious optimism and excitement in working with Browning, through his frustration with Browning's intransigence and refusal to change his work, most especially with the need for more action on stage, not off; to the final conviction

---

[2] McKay, p. 130.
[3] Ibid., p. 131.
[4] Ibid., p. 125.
[5] Ibid., p. 128.

that *'it must fail'*, we can chart the progress of Browning's *Strafford*, judging from these two diary entries at the beginning and the end of production:

> It would indeed be some recompense for the miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts which I have endured in my profession if, by its exercise, I had awakened a spirit of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn our degraded drama. May it be! (February 1836)

> I expect it will be damned – grievously hissed at the end – from the unintelligibility of the motives, the want of action, and consequently of interest … (23rd April 1837)[6]

A few years later, Browning tried again, and offered Macready *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, because he realised that Macready, like himself, had the desired aim of making audiences receptive to modern literature on the stage. However, Macready met with the same pitfalls, and Browning turned out to be just as troublesome in making any changes to his work, leaving Macready with the same headache and hassles as had the previous production. Reviews, predictably, were not kind; GH Lewes wrote in the *Westminster Review*:

> In the worst sense [it] is *written for the stage*, i.e. the poet has asked himself what *situations* could be made out of his subject, not what would be the natural consequences of the passions. He has succeeded so far. But the whole *dramatic* nature of the piece is false … It failed to touch the audience, because it was *untrue*; it succeeded occasionally in rousing them because it was theatrical.[7]

G.H. Lewes felt very strongly on this topic and was to write later in *The Leader*:

"Who are the successful dramatists of the day? Precisely those who do not imitate the Elizabethan form".[8]

---

[6] Ibid., pp. 131-133.
[7] Ibid., p 135.
[8] *The Leader*, 3 August 1850, p. 124.

The whole situation led to the complete breakdown of the relationship between Macready and Browning, with bitter words on both sides. Macready referred to Browning as a 'wretched insect' meaning "Browning and the tribe of literati who were so utterly preoccupied with self-regard that they could ignore the unalterable conditions of the contemporary playhouse"; Browning said of Macready; "The poorest Man of Letters (...) I ever knew is of far higher talent than the best actor I ever expect to know".[9] But Browning's stubbornness and adherence to the poetic form was not the only problem; the sheer size of Victorian theatres made it almost impossible to present a contemplative work.

Bulwer-Lytton was rather more successful in the production of his plays, but also owed a debt of thanks to Macready for making them work on stage. His most popular dramas were *The Lady of Lyons* (1838) and *Richelieu* (1839). Although they too were written in verse, Macready worked closely with Bulwer-Lytton on the acting texts, and they were aided by having strongly melodramatic themes, such as the triumph of good over evil. These early to mid century productions became a compromise between the old style poetic tragedies and the new melodrama. During his years as an actor-manager, Macready resisted the "new style" drama, and even turned down an adaptation by Dickens himself of *Oliver Twist*.

Several of Bulwer-Lytton's plays were popular throughout the nineteenth century, and although they would almost certainly be unplayable today, we must remember that, "In any consideration of nineteenth century drama, we must never

---

[9] McKay, p. 134.

forget the skill of the great actors in transforming what today seem pages of lifeless and unreadable text into a tour de force which electrified audiences and stirred memories years after the events".[10] In most other cases, nineteenth century novelists, poets and some journalists did not write for the theatre, predominantly because it didn't pay. From the end of the eighteenth century until 1860, payments to playwrights had fallen dramatically. Initially, as a result of the protracted Napoleonic wars, this was because of the economic state of the early nineteenth century, which again directly affected the economic state of the theatre. After a time, though, this became accepted practice. A dramatist would probably be offered a single payment of £50 to £100 per act (in the West End) and considerably less outside it. These fees paid were irrespective of how long the play ran, how many times it was reproduced in the theatre's repertoire, or even if it was produced anywhere else.

In comparison, in 1861, Wilkie Collins received a promise of £5000 from the publishers Smith Elder for his novel *Armadale* before he had written a word. For the writer who wished to make a profit from his work, the incentive was to write fiction or work in journalism, rather than write for the stage; not only was the pay scale higher, but his work would also not be subject to the inevitable delays involved in production, or the possibility of severe rewriting and editing by the manager and the actors. No writer of any talent, education or artistic ambition would submit to the extremely low pay, financial instability, constant demand and deadlines, and non-existent protection for his work. Managers of the big houses,

---

[10] Booth, Michael, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*, p. 18.

for that matter, would not bother with supporting the idealistic writer, requiring merely as many plays as were needed to fit the changing nightly bills and which could be played to full houses.

As the century progressed, the change from quality to quantity became more apparent, as more theatres were built and audiences greatly increased. Demand for plays became higher than ever before, especially after deregulation in 1843, and the building boom in the 1860s. Because there was such a huge appetite for new drama, virtually anybody could, and did, write plays. The hack dramatist would take any idea, be it from a currently popular novel, or a particularly exciting news story, and drop it into the enduringly popular theatrical form of the day, melodrama. Translations from the French were also common. Everyone tried their hand at writing plays, from actors, theatre staff before and behind the curtain, and even those outside the theatrical profession. Because of this proliferation of playwrights, "within the theatrical hierarchy of his day the playwright's standing was lower than the call-boy's".[11] The lowly status of the playwright is another important reason why any self-respecting author or journalist did not want to write for theatre.

Of course adapting the most successful and well-read novels of the day for the stage was very popular, and unfortunately the novel writer had very little recourse to prevent this from taking place. Dickens's works were constantly adapted for the stage, sometimes even before the serial was finished. Early in his career, and in a characteristically incisive way, he severely parodies the practice of

---

[11] Baker, p. 36.

adapting French dramas for the English stage in *Nicholas Nickleby.* Vincent Crummles, having taken the destitute Nicholas and Smike into his acting troupe has asked Nicholas to produce a new play by the following Monday morning:

> 'On Monday morning we shall read a new piece,' said Mr Crummles; 'the name's not known yet, but everybody will have a good part. Mr Johnson [Nicholas] will take care of that.'

Nicholas is appalled that he is expected to write a play in two days:

> 'But really I can't,' returned Nicholas; 'my invention is not accustomed to these demands, or possibly I might produce – '
>
> 'Invention! What the devil's that got to do with it!' cried the manager hastily.
>
> 'Everything, my dear sir.'
>
> 'Nothing, my dear sir,' retorted the manager, with evident impatience. 'Do you understand French?'
>
> 'Perfectly well.'
>
> 'Very good,' said the manager, opening the table drawer, and giving a roll of paper from it to Nicholas. 'There! Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title-page. Damn me,' said Mr Crummles, angrily, 'if I haven't often said that I wouldn't have a man or woman in my company that wasn't master of the language, so that they might learn it from the original, and play it in English, and save all this trouble and expense.'[12]

The question of copyright was a particular problem for the writer of drama. If the play was published, any establishment could play it anywhere. If the play was not published, it could still be pirated from performance, and again played anywhere. The Copyright Act of 1833 (promoted by Bulwer-Lytton), attempting to redress this lack of protection, brought the work of dramatists under its rule of

---

[12] Dickens, Charles, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 166.

law; but stage copyright was based upon actual performance of the play, and not the printing of it. Thus, copyright performances were regularly put on, and the matinee, which developed later in the century, was often used for this purpose. This is the reason why Collins had his plays privately printed (but not published), and gave several copyright performances, even if the plays were never ultimately produced. An example of this is his play *The Evil Genius: A Drama in Four Acts*, which was given one copyright performance in 1885.

Collins himself had very strong feelings on copyright, both in terms of dramatic literature and literature in general. He especially attacked the American publishers, who were not liable, under American law, to render to European authors any remuneration for publishing their works. Collins wrote often and long on this subject, and most notably in a piece entitled *Considerations on the Copyright Question Addressed to an American Friend*, in 1880:

> After a certain lapse of time, the three greatest nations in the continent of Europe – France, Germany and Italy – agreed with England that an act of justice to literature still remained to be done. Treaties of international copyright were accordingly exchanged between these States; and an author's right of property in his own work was now recognised in other countries than his own.
>
> With this honourable example set before it by other Governments, what has the Government of the United States done? Nothing! To this day it refuses to the literary property of other people the protection which it gives to the literary property of its own people. To this day, the President and Congress of America remain content to contemplate the habitual perpetration, by American citizens, of the act of theft.[13]

[13] Collins, Wilkie, *Considerations on the Copyright Question Addressed to an American Friend*, 1880.

After years of lobbying and voicing of opinions in the press and elsewhere, in which Collins's strong voice was a leading one, the International Copyright convention of 1887 and American Act of 1891 finally covered dramatists' work, and was of great benefit to the playwright's earnings. The playwright was also finally able to publish work without jeopardising his copyright. The Berne Convention of 1886 again helped the production of new works enormously, by preventing the normal practice of plagiarising French and German drama, and gave the English writer for the stage more of an incentive to produce original work.

Another problem which the Victorian dramatist had to confront was censorship. With the advent of the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, censorship was tightened as a consequence. Every play had to be submitted to the Examiner of Plays in the Lord Chamberlain's Office, who would approve or disapprove of the piece, following very strict guidelines. The rules as to what could or could not be shown onstage were tight; political, sexual, religious topics all came under the Examiner's jurisdiction; which included, in effect, any contemporary topic. This is one of the reasons why plagiarism of Dickens's work never worked on stage, as, without the social justice element, the work is pure melodrama. The Examiner could forbid performance of part or all of a drama, and had complete authority. Because of this, there could be very little contemporary significance in the drama seen on stage, only the stock situation of the triumph of good over evil. This is yet another reason why both amongst contemporaries and modern practitioners, the perception is strong that, until late in the century, Victorian drama was trivial, and

isolated from contemporary issues. Collins was unexpectedly fortunate in being allowed to have a priest on stage in his play *The New Magdalen*. Rather than being a particularly Victorian problem, however, this situation actually lasted up until 1968.

The system of payment for the dramatist, however, was about to change. In 1860, Dion Boucicault, who, having been an actor, knew the theatrical system extremely well, demanded a percentage of the box office profits for his production of *The Colleen Bawn*, at the Adelphi Theatre, under the management of Benjamin Webster. This set a precedent, and more playwrights began doing this. At the same time, the Bancrofts at the Prince of Wales began paying Tom Robertson a sum per performance rather than just a lump fee. By the time the playwright became a respected figure in the theatre and society in the 1890's, there was decent financial remuneration, fair copyright protection, and an understanding of the boundaries of the Lord Chamberlain, all thanks to their predecessors.

Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) was a writer in contrast to the "literary" figures writing for the stage. He is one of the most prolific and remembered writers of melodrama, and took it to new heights. While Charles Kean was presenting spectacular Shakespeare, Boucicault was creating train wrecks and drownings on stage. He was also instrumental in bringing in the long run. Boucicault's first success was a comedy, *London Assurance,* in 1841. The first of his great melodramas, *The Corsican Brothers*, was presented in 1852. After that followed two decades, first in America then London, of his great melodramas: *The Poor of New York* (or London, or Manchester, wherever the play happened to

be staged), in 1857; *The Octoroon*, 1859; *The Colleen Bawn*, 1860; *Arrah-na-Pogue*, 1864, *The Shaughraun*, 1874. He died in New York in 1890. He himself said of the audiences of the time, "what they want is domestic drama, treated with broad comic character ... a sentimental, pathetic play, comically rendered"[14]; clearly he had his finger on the pulse, and his melodramas were perennially popular. Apart from his writing, however, his professionalism and knowledge of the theatre helped to change the climate of mid-Victorian theatre in terms of remuneration and the length of run; "Boucicault had no delusions of genius. In his view, a playwright had 'to be practical, utilitarian, … in sympathetic accord with the minds of the people."[15]

Melodrama, more than any other dramatic literature of the time, is the most contemporarily significant and issue-based literature to appear on the Victorian stage. It is in many ways the truest social reflection of its times, in that it reflected the values and mores of society, most especially the working class. It was in touch with the times. It also dealt with social issues such as ethics, morality, poverty, and class responsibility - frequently the villains of the piece were upper class, taking advantage of the working class hero and/or heroine.

There were several types of melodrama presented throughout the Victorian period, from early in the century: the nautical, as in *Black Eye'd Susan* by Douglas Jerrold (which was very popular and revived throughout the century), the old style Gothic melodrama, as in Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802,

---

[14] Boucicault, Dion. *Plays*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Peter Thomson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 12..

[15] Jenkins, Anthony. *The Making of Victorian Drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 25.

which was the first theatrical piece to be called a melodrama, and was heavily influenced by the English Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century; and finally the domestic. This style became the dominant form from the middle of the century. It also came to be most closely associated with the Adelphi Theatre, hence the term "Adelphi Drama".

One of the main reasons that melodrama was especially popular with the working class was that, "for the first time in English dramatic history, they themselves were the heroes of a drama written especially for them, in a language and with simplicity they could understand, and drama concerned with their own lives and dreams."[16] Melodrama treated lower class characters and their lives seriously and compassionately. Generally, however, melodrama was popular with every class, in that it contained strong popular and moral appeal. There was great emotion and sentiment, potential tragedy, a low comedy subplot, strong romanticism, remarkable events and edge-of-your-seat suspense, clearly delineated and generally beloved stock characters, domestic settings and domestic life, and most importantly, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice. One can see that these themes are very similar to those of most popular novels of the period, and that the Victorian novel is very similar to melodrama in style and appeal.

Melodrama was also intensely visual, and, as mentioned before, the Victorians liked their entertainment to be visual. Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and the work of those who followed the school, represented a good example of this, once they overcame the prejudices of the Royal Academy and gained wide popular

---

[16] Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 25.

appeal: some examples are *The Reprieve* by John Everett Millais and *Waiting for the Verdict* by Augustus Egg. Sometimes plays were actually written on themes suggested by this type of painting. In addition, the acts generally ended with a "tableau", in which the actors would freeze in some picturesque and/or dramatic pose to give the final visual impact before the curtain fell. A prime example of this is *The Rent Day* by Douglas Jerrold, performed very successfully at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1832, based on the painting of David Wilkie of the same name, as well as his painting *Distraining for Rent*. The opening tableau, on the rise of the curtain, was *The Rent Day* down to the last detail, which *Distraining for Rent* was the tableau at the end of the first act. David Wilkie, in a letter to Clarkson Stanfield written after seeing the play early in its run, wrote, "how much I feel obligated … particularly to Mr. Jerrold, whose inventive fancy has created out of the dumb show of a picture, all the living characters and progressive events of real life".[17] Jerrold replied, "[the author] cannot forget how great a portion of that success is attributable to the painter, who has made the pictures – of which that drama is the shadow – the familiar 'household gods' of the English public".[18]

Music was also a very important element of melodrama, in the setting of mood and sometimes in the warning of change in sentiment between scenes. At first, of course, before the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, it was a legal necessity for the non-patent houses, but it soon became an important staple of all melodramatic performances. From the earliest striking of chords at various

---

[17] Meisel, Martin. *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 149.

intervals in order to legally perform a "burletta", the element of music grew to be a vital part of the action and emotional mood of a melodrama.

Contrary to contemporary opinion, the working classes liked their entertainments to be pure and full of moral lesson. T.W. Erle, writing in *Letters from a Theatrical Scene Painter* (1880), tells of venturing to one of the "minor" theatres in a working class neighbourhood in 1860: "the Author wishes in justice to them to say, that even the humblest of those places compared very favourably, and greatly to their credit, with the more pretentious houses, in point of the regard which was shown for propriety".[19] Drama was flourishing in working class theatres, and was giving the people what they wanted, as opposed to some West End shows like Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, which was considered to have lax morals.

The beginning of the move in the West End away from melodramatic theatre towards a more naturalistic style, leading up to the work of writers in the 1890's, was brought about largely by the Bancrofts and Tom Robertson, who were trying to capture a different audience: "The changes in taste effected by the middle class capture of the theatre naturally determined the content and performance of the drama written for them."[20] Melodrama still proved popular, however, well into the beginning of the 20th century; the final death blow of melodrama was the rise of cinema, which took over the plots, characterisations and melodramatic acting style so beloved in the Victorian period; "It is easy to

---

[18] Ibid., p. 151.
[19] Jackson, pp. 37-38.
[20] Ibid., p. 34.

laugh at, but when inclined to scorn one must remember that melodrama was a genuinely popular art form commanding the support and affection of millions of people for over a century of theatrical history."[21]

Comedy of the period, as exemplified by Boucicault's *London Assurance,* and the works of Robertson, Bulwer-Lytton and G.H. Lewes, also contained many elements of melodrama, most notably strong pathos and emotions. In studying Victorian theatre, though one can classify the types of theatrical entertainment, it is, however, difficult to make clear distinctions between the genres of tragedy, comedy, melodrama. Comedy contained similar themes to these other kinds of stage entertainment, including the ideal of womanhood, the sanctity of marriage, domestic harmony, class conflict and social ambition; most important of of all, however, was money. These themes were of course used in the great novels of the period as well.

For example, Bulwer Lytton's comedy, *Money*, written in 1840, is full of both ironic satire and heavy emotion. There is the ultimate triumph of the good hero, who is united with his good heroine. There are similar rewards for the hero in Robertson's *Society,* written in 1865. *Society* is an important play, in that it established much of the tone for the comedies that were to follow. It is dissimilar to *London Assurance*, which looked back to the style of Restoration comedies. Boucicault later tried the new style of comedy in *The School for Scheming* in 1847, but it still had a ring of Restoration in its very title.

---

[21] Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 40.

Many comedies of the period highlighted the Victorian obsession with wealth, financial solvency, and a contempt for the *nouveau riche*. New money versus old money was a very popular theme. Strikingly, more than any other form, this new kind of comedy, from 1840 onwards, was entertainment for the middle class only.

Of all the playwrights of the mid-Victorian period, Tom Robertson stands out as the writer most influential on later Victorian dramatists, although his career was short. Robertson knew theatre inside and out, having had long years of apprenticeship on his father's circuit around Lincoln, and later in London. Like Boucicault, he did everything from acting, stage management, prompting, and scene painting, to writing songs and plays. He was even for a time a drama critic. This education gave him an extremely thorough grounding in theatre, with clear ideas on how to produce and write plays. But he had his own strong beliefs in artistic restraint and truth to nature, and his union with the Bancrofts was a happy and fortuitous one: "Robertson's ideas about the performance of his plays so well accorded with the notions of the Bancrofts that the theatrical union of both parties was a perfect example of a marriage between a dramatist in search of a company and a company in search of a dramatist."[22] They trusted him so far as to allow him to stage manage his own plays, and in some ways he also anticipated the modern director. From the perspective of the 1880's, W.S. Gilbert declared that "stage

---

[22] Robertson, T. W.., *Six Plays. With an Introduction by Michael R. Booth.* Ashover, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1980, p. xi.

management 'as now understood', that is, the direction of plays – was absolutely invented by Robertson".[23]

Robertson's style was very new, in that it was restrained, with a simple domesticity, and a knack for juxtaposition of characters and events. Even the love scenes were delicately handled. There is a definite change in dramatic literature from Robertson onwards, in that it became quieter and more restrained, though this was never acknowledged: "the scarcity of Robertson's disciples was partly due to his early death and to the brief spell of six years in which all his theatrical success was packed".[24] Also, it is said that "the twenty years following Robertson's death proved a period of great theatrical progress but mostly dramatic stagnation. The actor managers' emphasis fell on presentation, not on what was presented."[25] At the time, however, it was universally acknowledged by those influential in the theatre, that a new era was born, and the lesson learned by the young actor just starting out, Arthur Wing Pinero, was not forgotten.

Comedy continued after Robertson's death with the early works of W.S. Gilbert, before his union with Sullivan, in plays like *Engaged*, 1877. This piece in itself was considered revolutionary, in that it handled themes common to Victorian comedy, but was newly ironic. Gilbert satirises the cherished themes of womanhood, purity, and matrimonial harmony. Contemporary critics reviewed it violently.

---

[23] Ibid., p. xi.
[24] Rowell, George. *Theatre in the Age of Irving*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1981, p. 57.
[25] Ibid., p. 74.

Finally the comedies of the 1890s, which have a lasting place in the theatrical canon, appeared on the scene, though they hardly 'burst', given what had gone before. But even these comedies, apart from Wilde's sharpness and wit, are straight, well-made plays. The theme is more now fear of exposure, social disgrace and ostracism, as in the *Case of Rebellious Susan* by Henry Arthur Jones. These are very much in the tradition of the *piece bien fait.* Arthur Wing Pinero, firmly established as one of the most popular and prolific playwrights of the late Victorian period, was the first dramatist to receive a knighthood in 1909.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# COLLINS'S EARLY PLAYS

Into this period of great theatrical development, upheaval and reform comes Wilkie Collins who, by 1857 and his first professional theatrical production, was a fairly established writer of growing reputation. But Collins, having begun to establish himself in his chosen career as writer, had always had a love of the theatre, and fancied himself as a playwright as well as novelist and journalist, stating "if I know anything of my faculty, it is a dramatic one".[1] In the preface to *Basil*, written in 1852, he sets down the premise behind all his writing for both stage and page: "Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also".[2]

Although Collins famously met Dickens through an amateur production of Bulwer-Lytton's "Not So Bad as We Seem", Collins had already enthusiastically carried out his own amateur theatricals in the back room of his mother's house in Blandford Square, where they performed such pieces as Goldsmith's *Good Natur'd Man* and Sheridan's *The Rivals*. His fellow amateurs included his brother Charley, the painters Frith and Millais, friends such as Edward Ward, and most likely his mother, who had herself once intended to go on the stage. All this theatrical activity culminated in a semi-public performance of his adaptation of a French piece by Joseph Phillippe Simon and Edmond Badon, which he translated as *A Court Duel*. This was performed, in 1850, as a charity performance for the

---

[1] Clarke, William and William Baker, eds. *The Letters of Wilkie Collins.* Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 208.
[2] Collins, Wilkie, *Basil.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. xxxvii.

Female Emigration Fund at Miss Kelly's Theatre in Soho, a theatre often used for amateur performances. The performance took place two days before the publication of his first novel, *Antonina, Or the Fall of Rome.* He had also published, in January of 1850, a travelogue of Cornwall, entitled *Rambles Beyond Railways*; and, in the popular magazine, *Bentley's Miscellany*, a short story entitled *The Twin Sisters*.

His next amateur production was about to dramatically alter the course of his life. Collins met Charles Dickens on 12 March 1851. Augustus Egg, a mutual friend and long-time friend of the Collins' family, suggested Collins to Dickens for a part in his latest amateur production when it was turned down by W H Wills, Dickens's faithful (and long-suffering) editorial assistant on *Household Words*. The part was Smart, the valet, in *Not So Bad As We Seem*, an 18th century-style farce written by Bulwer-Lytton. Dickens wrote to Egg in reply to his suggestion, "I knew his father very well, and should be very glad to know him".[3] Dickens indeed knew William Collins, and had commissioned a painting from him, which was 'Ischia Bay of Naples' and for which he paid £100.[4] As an incentive to take the part of his servant (Dickens was playing the lead), Dickens wrote: "a small part – but, what there is of it, decidedly good – he opens the play … in which he would have an opportunity of dressing your humble servant, frothing some chocolate with an obsolete milling machine … and dispatching other similar 'business', dear to actors".[5] The performances were in aid of the newly

---

[3] Peters, p. 95.
[4] Ibid., p. 95.
[5] Ibid., p. 96.

established Guild of Literature and Art, set up to provide writers and artists a kind of pension/insurance scheme for when they were out of work. Later, Collins graduated to the part of Shadowly Softhead, after Douglas Jerrold pulled out of a tour to Manchester.

When Dickens and Collins met, Dickens was at the height of his power and popularity, and Collins was just beginning to tentatively make his mark. Yet despite the twelve year age gap, they became very close friends. Dickens was drawn to the fact that, not only was Collins a young and up and coming writer, but he was a prodigious worker (almost, you could say, a workaholic, like his father). Collins worked hard and played hard. Together they prowled London, all sorts of neighbourhoods, including the rough slums of Soho or the East End, night houses and possibly brothels: "If Wilkie's letters to him had survived Dickens's bonfires, the question [of what they got up to] might have been settled".[6] But to Dickens Collins was not only a friend in "play"; he had a similar sort of skill and devotion to the literary and journalistic calling, and they had a long and fruitful partnership, often writing Christmas numbers together for *Household Words*, and also working together on *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* in 1857.

John Forster, Dickens's close friend and ultimately his biographer, took a strange dislike to Collins. He was jealous of the friendship, so much so that Collins is hardly mentioned in Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*. Privately Collins considered the book to be "The Life of John Forster, with notices of Dickens", and in even stronger terms he said to Wybert Reeve, "Forster's own vanity and identity

---

[6] Ibid., p. 99.

with all Dickens's works and actions are so persistently put before the reader that John Forster is as prominent as Charles Dickens throughout".[7] However, the good-natured Collins never held grudges, and dedicated *Armadale* to Forster, "in affectionate remembrance of a friendship which is associated with some of the happiest years of my life."[8]

` Dickens himself had early in his career attempted to write plays, and had three performed at the St. James's Theatre; *The Strange Gentleman*, a farce based on one of the Boz sketches; *the Village Coquettes*, a comic opera; and *Is She His Wife?, or Something Singular*, a comic burletta. Later Dickens was almost to disown these early efforts, and certainly thought them contemptible. In a letter to R.H. Horne, written in 1843, he states: "I did it in a fit of damnable good nature long ago, for Hullah [the manager], who wrote some very pretty music to it. I just put down for everybody what everybody at the St. James's Theatre wanted to say and do best, and I have been most sincerely repentant ever since"[9]. He seems, however, to have been pleased with them at the time, even sending Macready a copy of *The Strange Gentleman* in the hope that it might interest him for production, but he never tried the experiment of writing a play by himself again.

Throughout 1851 Collins continued to write articles for *Bentley's Miscellany*, including a somewhat scathing review of the Pre-Raphaelites, which he published anonymously, not wanting to hurt his friends or indeed his brother's feelings. Clearly he had little sympathy with their aims in art; "they appear … to

---

[7] Ibid., p. 349.
[8] Collins, Wilkie, *Armadale*. London: The Penguin Group, 1995, dedication.
[9] Fawcett, F. Dubrez. *Dickens the Dramatist*. London: W.H. Allen, 1952, p. 25.

be wanting in one great desideratum of all art – judgement in selection".[10] He, of course, knew a great deal about art, having grown up in a very artistic household; not only was his father a painter, but his mother's family were artists as well. She was cousin to Andrew Geddes, the Scottish painter, and her sister, Collins's aunt, was Margaret Geddes (later Margaret Carpenter) who became one of the foremost portraitists of her day. Three of her children, Collins's cousins, also became painters. He learned a great deal from writing his father's memoirs, with their detailed descriptions of William Collins's paintings. He not only had to describe his father's landscapes, but had to enable the reader to "see" them. This early lesson also provided him with the skill of atmospheric scene painting in words which is so prevalent in his writing.

In 1851 Collins also began to write for *The Leader*, a radical newspaper founded by George Lewes and Thornton Leigh Hunt, of which his close friend (and life-long sailing companion) Edward Piggott later become editor, then proprietor. He regularly reviewed books, art exhibitions, plays and operas. By 1852, he was also contributing to *Household Words*, touring with Dickens's amateur production of *Not So Bad As We Seem*, and completing his new novel, *Basil*.

With the publication of *Basil* in 1852, though it was detested by some critics for its "vicious atmosphere" and unwholesome, morally suspect content, Collins was really beginning to be taken seriously as a writer. Dickens praised the novel's "admirable writing" and "delicate discrimination of character", and

---

[10] Peters, p. 103.

Catherine Peters maintains that it was this novel that "confirmed Dickens's opinion of Collins as a serious artist".[11] Collins's contributions to *Household Words* became more frequent, including the publication of a short story, *Gabriel's Marriage*, in April of 1853.

The story takes place during the French Revolution, which was something of an obsession with English writers of the time as a result of the publication of Carlyle's influential history, *The French Revolution* in 1837. The Sarzeau are a family of fisherman on the Normandy coast, and the story begins in a storm. François Sarzeau, the father, and his son Pierre are out in the storm fishing, and are feared dead by the family back in the hut, son Gabriel, his Grandfather, Gabriel's betrothed Perrine, and Gabriel's sisters. Grandfather Sarzeau, old and dying, is upset by the storm and hallucinating, claiming that he can see "the White Women", presaging the death of the fishermen out in the storm. ("White Women" seems to have been something of a theme with Collins). He becomes delirious at times, but after he dismisses the women from the room he lucidly tells Gabriel of his guilty secret – the knowledge that many years ago his son, François, killed and robbed a wealthy stranger who had asked for rest in his house. This was considered wholly dishonourable as hospitality was very important in seventeenth century France, the care, feeding, and general safety of your guest being your entire responsibility.

In the morning, François and Pierre miraculously return, to everyone's relief, but Gabriel's discomfiture. He asks his Grandfather for reconfirmation of

---

[11] Ibid., p. 121.

the story he told the previous night, but he denies it, ultimately dying with a falsehood on his lips. Gabriel is now doubly concerned, but François tries to laugh it off as the fancies of a dying man. He goes to tell the local priest his father is dead, while Gabriel goes to the Merchant's Table, a configuration of rocks where the body was supposedly taken. He is relieved to find nothing there, and his mind is set at rest. François, however, had followed him, and rejects him for doubting his word and believing him to be a murderer. He refuses to speak to Gabriel and this carries on for months. Gabriel is in constant doubt so hesitates to confide in anyone.

At this point in the story, Perrine's father, in trouble because of the revolution, urges Gabriel to marry her soon and therefore give her his protection, should the father be taken away by the Revolutionary committee. Monsieur Bonan knows of a renowned priest, Father Paul, who bravely conducts religious services on a boat moored offshore, in the face of intense opposition from the revolutionaries. The ship would be in their area that night and the marriage could take place after the service.

Gabriel and Perrine's family attend the service, but he is overcome with shame and guilt. Father Paul takes Gabriel aside, and he confesses all. Father Paul in turn tells him he is the man his father tried to kill, although miraculously he had survived his father's attempted murder. He asks Gabriel to lead him to his father, after he performs their marriage. François and Father Paul spend a long time alone in the hut together and at last François emerges repentant, promising as penance to re-erect the roadside crosses that were demolished by the

revolutionaries. He does so, and after many years, dies in the middle of his task forgiven by man and God, and buried under one of the rude, humble wooden crosses he so lovingly restored.

The story was later published in *After Dark* (1856), a collection of short stories linked by the narrative of a poor travelling portrait-painter who meets people who tell him tales on his travels. It became 'The Nun's Story of Gabriel's Marriage', and is told to the painter by a nun in a convent based on the House of Lanhearne in the Vale of Mawgan, Cornwall, which Collins had visited on his earlier walking tour of Cornwall. The painter is struck by a rude wooden cross, lovingly framed, and the nun then relates the story. Cornwall must have affected Collins deeply, because he was to make it the setting for his next novel, *The Dead Secret* (1857), and for his next play, *The Lighthouse*, written in 1855 and adapted from 'Gabriel's Marriage'.

By this time Dickens and Collins were firm friends and collaborators, having travelled to Italy for three months together with Augustus Egg, in 1853. In May of 1855 Dickens wrote to Thomas Beard,

> We are going to do a 'grown-up play' in the children's theatre, with a smaller audience and a larger stage. Mr Collins has written an odd MeloDrama, the whole action of which (of course it is short) takes place in a lighthouse. He shewed it to me for advice, and some suggestions that I made to him involved a description of how such a thing ought to be done in a Theatre — and might be done if there were more sense in such places. So we are going to show Mr Webster what it means![12]

It is likely that Dickens altered some of the dialogue for his character, Aaron Gurnock, based on a combination of the Grandfather and François. Dickens played

---

[12] Dexter, Walter, ed., *Dickens to his Oldest Friend*, p. 302.

Aaron Gurnock, Wilkie played his son, Martin, Mary Dickens played Phoebe Dale, Martin's betrothed, Georgina Hogarth played Lady Grace, and Egg and Mark Lemon were also in the cast. The play was performed on four separate occasions. Clarkson Stanfield designed the set and act-drop, which was later used in the professional production.

Clarkson Stanfield, a good friend of Dickens, had fifteen years experience as a scene painter for many London theatres including the Haymarket and Drury Lane, before he turned to serious painting and became a member of the Royal Academy. He worked on many of Dickens's amateur theatricals, even though by this time his health was suffering, and he was directed by his doctor not to paint large pictures. For this occasion, however, he excelled himself, as Henry Morley describes his backdrop: "An exquisite picture (for such it is, and not a mere ordinary scene) of Eddystone as it stood in those days, from the pencil of Mr Stanfield, was the drop-scene".[13]

*The Lighthouse* is a play with two acts and a prologue, set inside the second Eddystone Lighthouse built by John Rudyard, off the coast of Plymouth. The period is the year 1748, slightly earlier than 'Gabriel's Marriage'. The story begins with a prologue by an unseen speaker with the curtain down, who tells of a "A story of the rocks where doomed ships come to cast their dead." Act I takes place in the kitchen chamber. Jacob Dale, the third lighthouse keeper, is seated in a chair, with Martin Gurnock, engaged to his daughter Phoebe, seated on a sea chest opposite. They, along with Martin's father Aaron, are stuck in the

---

[13] Morley, Henry. *The Journal of a London Playgoer*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974. p. 103.

lighthouse with little hope of rescue, having been cut off from the mainland for several weeks, with their provisions all but gone. They are waiting for the provision boat.

A ship is seen, and Jacob goes up to sound the gong. Aaron Gurnock appears, faint, and half-dead with hunger, having woken from a terrible dream. He tells Martin the story of his life — how, when he was a farmer, a lady had come to seek refuge at his humble cottage during a storm. His friend Benjamin Tranter killed her for her money, and Aaron assisted in hiding her body in a cave. Martin is horrified by the story, and feels that the son of a murderer's accomplice is no fit husband for Phoebe. Suddenly the provision boat arrives, with Phoebe on board. However, the story his father told weighs upon Martin and he eats with little appetite. The Act ends with a shipwreck, and the name of the ship is "Lady Grace", the name of the woman whom Aaron helped murder.

Act II begins with Phoebe grieving at the change in Martin towards her, but also discussing the kindness of a lady who has been saved from the shipwreck, who is in the lighthouse. Jacob is angry with Martin for his apparent coolness to his daughter. Martin confronts Aaron, who denies his story of the previous day, saying he made it up out of madness from hunger and fever of the brain, and rounds on Martin for shrinking from him. Suddenly Lady Grace enters, and Aaron nearly swoons at the sight. She is the lady he had supposedly assisted in murdering. However, she was only badly wounded, and saved by smugglers who found her in the cave where the two men had left her body. Aaron repents and

begs forgiveness, he is forgiven, and Martin and Phoebe are re-united with everyone's blessing.

This story is considerably lighter than 'Gabriel's Marriage'; François actually did attempt to commit murder, on his own and with little remorse, and is much crueller to his son. He is actually the "Benjamin Tranter" of the piece, while Aaron Gurnock, in the play, is more akin to the dying Grandfather. François's repentance is therefore of greater significance.

Dickens in his enthusiasm for the piece invited the newspapers to send reviewers. Henry Morley had this to say: "None of the leading incidents are shown actually, but their workings on the minds of the three lighthouse-men .. contribute interest enough to sustain an earnest attention throughout … rarely has acting on a public stage better rewarded scrutiny".[14] Alfred Wigan, manager of the Olympic, expressed interest, but nothing professional was to come of it for a few more years; in 1855 Collins wrote to his mother, "Wigan was obliged to decline the play because he could not 'cast' the part – that is, act it. If Macready had been still on the stage the play might have been performed – any present English tragedian would make nothing of the part of 'Aaron Gurnock'".[15] He also writes to his friend Charles Ward, "The principal part really requires a first-rate serious actor – and where is he to be found, Anno Domini 1855, in this great and prosperous Kingdom of England?".[16]

---

[14] Ibid., pp. 103-105.
[15] Collins, *Letters,* Vol. 1, p. 144.
[16] Ibid., p. 142.

However, 1857 was to be the year of Collins's greatest theatrical success thus far; his next amateur production written for Dickens, *The Frozen Deep*, was performed at Tavistock House in January of that year and before the Queen in July and August; and he finally had his first professional production in August.

There is a story that Dickens, before he began his writing career, intended to audition as an actor for Mr Bartley, but caught a cold which prevented him from doing so. Had he gone to the audition, it is likely that England would have been deprived of one of its greatest novelists, but the Victorian stage would have gained from having possibly one of its greatest actors. With *The Frozen Deep*, Dickens probably had his greatest role yet. It was also to change his life dramatically, for during an amateur production before a public audience in Manchester, with professional actresses in the female roles, Dickens was to meet and fall in love with Ellen Ternan. It also provided him with the idea for *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Collins was inspired to write the play by a controversy that was raging at the time regarding the lost Arctic expedition of Sir John Franklin, an explorer eventually credited with discovering the Northwest Passage. His final expedition was last seen in July of 1845. Further ships were sent after them in 1848, but nothing was found. The British Government offered a reward of £10,000 for any discovery regarding the lost men, which was eventually claimed by a Dr. John Rae. He claimed to have met a party of Eskimos, who related a story from another party of Eskimos, who had found a group of dead white men, some of whose bodies were mutilated, with cooking pots of human flesh nearby. Dickens, amongst others, was outraged by this suggestion of cannibalism, and the debate

raged in the papers for years. Interest was resumed in 1856 at the end of the Crimean War, with calls for a further expedition to find the men and exonerate Franklin's name. Between 1854 and 1857 Dickens wrote seven articles in *Household Words* on the subject. What inspired the debate was the hearsay nature of the evidence, and Dickens quotes an extract from Dr Rae's report: "None of the Esquimaux with whom I conversed had seen the 'whites', nor had they ever been at the place where the bodies were found, but had their information from those who had been there, and who had seen the party when travelling".[17]

Dickens's ultimate argument was that, "in weighing the probabilities and improbabilities of the 'last resource' [cannibalism], the foremost question is – not in the nature of the extremity; but, the nature of men. … the noble conduct and example of such men, and of their own great leader himself, under similar endurances, belies it, and outweighs by the weight of the whole universe the chatter of a gross handful of uncivilised people, with a domesticity of blood and blubber".[18] Nobility of character, of the Englishman in particular, was central to the story of *The Frozen Deep*, and Collins's writing of it was informed by Dickens's arguments on behalf of the lost explorers.

The story of *The Frozen Deep* revolves around the characters of Clara Burnham, Frank Aldersley and Richard Wardour. Wardour, in love with Clara, went away mistakenly believing himself to be betrothed to her. She had no intention of marrying him but, in his intensity and persistence, she could not get this through to him. On the eve of his return there is a party to send off a group of

---

[17] *Household Words*, 2 December 1854, p. 361.
[18] *Household Words*, 9 December 1854, p. 392.

Arctic explorers, one of whom is the man Clara truly loves, Frank Aldersley. Wardour returns, is rebuffed by Clara, and realises she is in love with someone else. In rage and despair he joins the expedition, little realising that Frank is his rival.

The second act takes place in the "frozen deep" – the party is low on provisions, and their last hope is to send a group for help. Wardour, dour and unpopular with the group except for Lieutenant Crayford, cares little whether he lives or dies, but is chosen to go with the group. Frank wants to go but is recovering from illness – however, as luck has it, he is also chosen. Wardour, in breaking up Frank's bunk for fuel, discovers he has carved C.B., and through careful questioning realises Frank is the man Clara loves. Suddenly he has a new lease of life, and the party sets off. Back in England, the women wait for news of the lost travellers. Clara believes that Wardour will kill Frank at some point during the expedition, and her belief is reinforced by her old Scottish nurse, who claims to have the gift of second sight.

The third and final act takes place on the shores of Newfoundland, where the women have sailed to meet the expedition, who have been found and rescued. Wardour and Frank, however, were separated from the rest of the group and are both believed dead. Clara is sure that Wardour killed Frank. In the middle of the reunion, Wardour appears, near mad, uncommunicative, and in desperate physical health. Crayford accuses Wardour of killing Frank, making sure that Clara is not by to hear. Clara appears, however, and Wardour, having at last found his object of desire, comes to life, rushes outside, and returns with Frank in his arms, whom

he has saved. Crayford is deeply repentant and overwhelmed by the nobility of character shown by Wardour. Amid much tearful rejoicing, Wardour dies, forgiven, his nobility praised by all.

Dickens excelled himself in the role of Wardour. In his collaboration on the play with Collins, he ensured that the part of Wardour was as strong as it could be, and that he became the central character. Dickens wrote to Collins in the autumn of 1856, "I should like to show you some cuts I have made in the second act (subject to authorial sanction, of course). They are mostly verbal, and all bring the Play closer together".[19] These judicious cuts ensure that Wardour's central place in the drama is secure. Rehearsals began in November of 1856, under the careful management of Dickens. Stanfield again contributed to the backdrops for Acts II and III, with the first act scenes by William Telbin. No expense was spared in converting the schoolroom of his house at Tavistock Square into a theatre, as Dickens the perfectionist created his greatest amateur theatrical triumph.

Reporters from the newspapers were again invited, and the event was hailed as "the outstanding theatrical event of 1857".[20] When the Queen saw it at a special performance for royalty on the 4th of July, she was very impressed, and a message was relayed that "her Majesty particularly wishes that her high approval should be conveyed to Mr. Wilkie Collins".[21] Dickens, wrestling with his failing marriage and in a highly emotional state, threw everything into his performance as

---

[19] Brannan, Robert Louis, ed. *Under the Management of Charles Dickens: His Production of "The Frozen Deep"*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966 , p. 33.
[20] Ibid., p. 1.
[21] Peters, p. 174.

Wardour, with singular effect; hardened stagehands were seen crying at his death scene. The release of performance was so important to him that he wrote to Collins, after it was finished, "I have never known a moment's peace or content, since the last night of the Frozen Deep"[22].

After the excitement of the productions in January and July, and finishing the serialisation of his latest novel, *The Dead Secret*, in *Household Words* in June, Collins was to have his first professional production staged in August 1857. *The Lighthouse* was performed at the Olympic Theatre, from 10 August to 17 October, under the management of Frederick Robson. Robson, an eminent and well-respected actor (he was a favourite of reviewer Henry Morley), played Aaron Gurnock. The rest of the cast were Walter Gordon as Martin Gurnock, Mr Addison as Jacob Dale, Miss Wyndham as Phoebe Dale, and the well-known Ada Swanborough as Lady Grace. George Vining, another well-known actor, read the prologue.

Collins received a flat fee of £100, but the real benefit to him was the play's success; he wrote to his mother, "The audience so enthralled by the story that they would not even bear the applause at the first entrance of Robson ... A perfect hurricane of applause at the end of the play — which I had to acknowledge from a private box. Dickens, Thackeray, Mark Lemon publicly appearing in my box. In short an immense success".[23] This is corroborated by the reviews: "The novelty of

---

[22] Brannan, p. 10.
[23] Collins, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 162.

the scene throughout told with an impressive result upon the audience, who ... loudly called for the author ... and cheered and applauded him vociferously".[24] During the run of two months, the theatre was nearly full every night. Even in October Collins is writing to his mother, "The other night the stalls were so full that the people had to be accommodated in the orchestra".[25]

The first night was a brilliant literary occasion, a fitting debut on the stage for this writer who loved the theatre and wanted nothing more than for the stage to be reclaimed for literature. Collins's fellow writers were suitably appreciative; "the theatre was completely crowded in every part; several of the highest literary celebrities were present amongst the audience, and from the beginning to the end of the entertainment the most determined enthusiasm was constantly manifested".[26] Reviewers on the whole were complimentary, giving a cautious reception to Collins's dramatic efforts, much as they had for his first novel, and seeing in him a dramatic writer of promise.

Some reviewers, however, unfairly compared the play unfavourably with the amateur performance, to which they had been invited:

> To say that 'The Lighthouse' loses nothing by its transformation to the boards of a metropolitan stage would be to exaggerate the truth; that it retains many of its most striking and exciting effects is obvious; but the want of constructive closeness in the second act, which comes as a sort of ante-climax ... is more perceptible in a public theatre than it was on the occasion of the drama's original production. ... Despite these slight drawbacks, 'The Lighthouse' is full of merit, and, admirably acted and well put upon the stage – as it assuredly is – will doubtless bring a large revenue to the theatre.[27]

---

[24] *Daily Telegraph,* 12 August 1857.
[25] Collins, *Letters,* Vol. 1, p. 163.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

The *Times* reviewer stated even more plainly, "People of the ordinary stamp ... will be satisfied with beholding a very charming story, very effectively acted; but those who have been admitted into the *sanctum* of Tavistock House will also recollect and miss a certain compactness that gave to the whole performance the character of a highly finished miniature".[28] The general consensus, however, is summed up by the reviewer of the *Daily News*:

> It will be seen that Mr Collins has contrived to pack a great deal of interest into a very small compass; and when we reflect how many long and tedious dramas we have yawned through, where one incident would have been a relief, we think we have good reason to congratulate the public on an accession to the ranks of dramatic authors. There are many little passages in the drama which show the neophyte, while at the same time they proclaim that the author, though new to his present work, is a skilled writer, and has allowed his literary art to interfere with his dramatic efforts. ... We have no doubt that should Mr Collins persevere in writing for the stage, he will speedily attain the first rank as an artist of what is known as "interesting drama".[29]

*The Lighthouse* was later translated into French by the critic and translator Émile Forgues, although ultimately it was never put on the Paris stage. Forgues had written an article on Collins in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1855, seeing in Collins a serious literary figure on the brink of something new and radical in English fiction. Collins took this article very much to heart. It was printed just after publication of his latest novel *Hide and Seek*, the most Dickensian of his works and written in a style that he was never to attempt again. Collins must have also been extremely flattered to be compared favourably to Balzac, one of his

---

[28] *The Times*, 12 August 1857.
[29] *Daily News*, 12 August 1857.

favourite writers, Forgues even preferring him for the qualities of charm and kindliness that the French writer entirely lacked.[30]

Collins, always enthusiastic about French literature and drama, published his own article, 'Dramatic Grub Street', in *Household Words* in 1858, stating that "in France, the most eminent, imaginative writers work, as a matter of course, for the stage as well as for the literary table."[31] This is something he wanted to redress, and he was to spend a large part of his working life trying to do so. Collins later dedicated his short story collection, *Queen of Hearts*, to Forgues. By this time Collins was well and truly bitten by the theatre bug and fully intended to carry on. He had an opportunity a year later, when Frederick Robson asked him to write another play following on from the popularity of *The Lighthouse*.

With the success of *The Lighthouse,* Collins felt assured enough to try his hand at an original stage play, the first not to be based on a work of fiction by himself, although he was to later use the play as the basis of one of his weaker novels, *Jezebel's Daughter* of 1880. At the request of Robson he created for him the part of Hans Grimm, a lunatic servant in the household of a German merchant. The play was *The Red Vial*.

Frederick Robson was a burlesque actor of the "old school", rather than of the new style burlesques popular in the mid-nineteenth century and typified by Planché and Madame Vestris at the Lyceum. Robson's style was more radical, and had a direct line back to the burlesques of Fielding. The currently fashionable and popular burlesques of Vestris, little more than word play and nonsense, were

---

[30] Peters, p. 157.
[31] Ibid., p. 182.

considered by some to be the "self-indulgent fantasy of the leisured class, in which elegance replaced satire".[32]

Robson was born in 1821, in Margate. He had a distinctive stature, being only five feet tall with a large head (a rather similar stature to Collins). Because of his height, as well as his comic talents, he started as a singer-comedian in the music-halls. Unusually for the time, he managed to make the move to legitimate theatre, although still in comic roles, and played Macbeth in a burlesque version by Thomas Talfourd at the Olympic Theatre. But his talents were more than just comic; with the tall and statuesque Mrs Alfred Phillips as his Lady, he played "with great sincerity – an equivalent character drawn from 'low-life', 'a red-headed Scottish sergeant of militia in a modern uniform, much addicted to whiskey', a little hen-pecked husband dominated by the statuesque wife of Mrs Phillips".[33] He then played Shylock, again bringing his own brand of realism and street-savvy to the part of the tragic Jew.

When Alfred Wigan took over the Olympic he encouraged Robson's playing of serious roles, and cast him (against Robson's instincts) in a Tom Taylor play, *Plot and Passion*, an historical piece. Henry Morley was inspired by this piece of casting, and what Robson brought to the part:

> The part he plays ... is that of a mean, double-faced, fawning, cunning, treacherous tool, in which the sordid passions have nevertheless not wholly extinguished others that place him finally at the mercy of his victims. Here the actor's opportunity is that of a constant and quick transition within the limited range of the emotions expressed ... Mr Robson's great quality is the downright earnestness by which he makes others feel what he very

---

[32] Taylor, George. *Players and Performance in the Victorian Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989, p. 73.
[33] Ibid., p. 75.

> evidently feels himself .. whoever else might occupy the scene, the eye still sought him out.[34]

Robson had also appeared in a play by Palgrave Simpson, based on *Eugenie Grandet* by Collins's favourite author, Balzac, and called *Daddy Hardacre*, a fact which must have strengthened the regard in which Collins held Robson. Both Collins and Dickens would have particularly appreciated Robson's style, which was much more along the lines of the 'naturalistic' school of acting. Robson's performances could well have inspired some of Dickens's own creations, such as Quilp in *Little Dorrit*, which was written during the height of Robson's career (1855-57): "Like many of Robson's characters, Quilp is comic in style and expression, but frightening and sinister in the intensity of his passions of both love and hate".[35]

Even with an eminent cast (Mrs Fanny Stirling played the part of the Widow Bergman) and the support of the production values of the Olympic Theatre, nothing could save *The Red Vial* from being "One of the most brilliant failures ever witnessed by play goers of a modern date".[36] The audience was appalled by the story, and the play was nearly hooted off the stage. The main objection of reviewers seemed to be to the morality of the plot; this time, Collins had gone too far in his treatment of the grotesque and fantastical.

Mrs. Bergman is a housekeeper in the firm of Rodenberg and Keller. Her daughter Minna is engaged to Keller's son, Karl, somewhat against the wishes of the father, because she is poor, although Mrs. Bergman is the widow of an eminent

---

[34] Ibid., p. 76.
[35] Ibid., p. 77.
[36] *Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1858.

physician. She is in debt due to her own extravagance, however, and knows that if it gets out of hand the engagement will be off. Rodenberg discovers that his firm has been robbed and the books falsified, so he suspects a member of his household. He tells Mrs Bergman and she points the finger at Hans Grimm, Rodenberg's servant, whom he has taken from a madhouse and treated kindly and with care. However, a bottle is discovered in Mrs Bergman's room which can erase ink and she is confronted. She breaks down and confesses that she acted purely for the sake of her daughter and promises to repay him. Out of pity he gives her six months, until the company audit.

The second act begins six months later less one day. Mrs. Bergman cannot find the money, and Rodenberg, who has fallen ill, declares he cannot keep the secret from his partner. She again appeals to his mercy but he will not relent. She decides to poison him with one of her late husband's potions and in the act of nursing him feeds him the poison, which in fact he never drinks. Hans Grimm, however, watching her in secret, finds what he thinks is an antidote in her medicine chest, which he gives to Rodenberg. Mrs Bergman discovers this, and persuades him that the liquid from the Red Vial, which is the poison, is actually good for him: "When you next want strength and want spirit, take ten drops out of this Red Vial, and you will be restored to yourself again".[37] Rodenberg, having taken the antidote given by Mrs. Bergman and which is a narcotic, appears to die.

The third act takes place in the Deadhouse, where corpses are laid to rest with a bell tied to their finger, in case they are not dead. Hans keeps watch over

---

[37] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Red Vial*, manuscript, British Library.

his beloved master in the company of the night watchman, an attempt at a comic character called Schwartz. Mrs. Bergman appears at the morgue, watching for a chance to ensure that Hans drinks from the Red Vial. A bizarre and unintentionally comic scene ensues with these three characters. Mrs Bergman, in an agony of suspense, wanders in and out feeling faint, and asking for water. Schwartz, offering Hans brandy as a restorative instead of the liquid from the Red Vial, advises Hans, "Never listen to what a woman tells you. Let her take her psychic herself". Hans laughs maniacally and declares, "Ha ha ha! We are a fine company here. One mad, one drunk, one frightened – and the rest dead".

At this point, the stage instructions are as follows: "Door opens a few inches, bangs to. Opens again, a bare hand and arm steal out over its black surface". The audience went into hysterics of laughter. The bell rings, and Mrs. Bergman goes into hysterics herself, declaring, "Hide me! Hide me! The bell is moving!". The supposedly dead man appears in his pall; Hans is overcome with joy, while Mrs. Bergman is just overcome. Hans kindly gives her some wine laced with the liquid from the Red Vial which he believes, according to her own words, to be good a restorative tonic. Mrs. Bergman dies, exclaiming "Death-struck by my own crime! Oh, my child, my child!".

The reviews are not as scathing as one might imagine from modern accounts of the first night. Though the audience found the play laughable, critics took seriously the artistic merit of the writing. Most were in agreement that Collins had great talent and imagination, but had failed in this instance with the

story he had chosen to dramatise. He was carefully watched after his recent theatrical successes, both amateur and professional:

> After *The Lighthouse* and *The Frozen Deep*, the question was mooted with much expectation whether their author possessed the power of writing a forcible and original play suited to the boards of a practical theatre, and calculated to elicit an amount of approval proportionate to that which his talent had won upon a smaller and less exacting arena [amateur dramatics] …The representation of last night ... proved that, great as undoubtedly is the talent of Mr Collins - powerful and fantastic as his imagination may be - extraordinary his ability for working up the details of horrible stories - original, firm, and startling his mental grasp - he does not possess that sense of distinction which tells a man where he must draw the line between what is to be described in the page of a romance and what is to be embodied upon the stage.[38]

Most importantly, the critic felt that "it transgresses all the limits which good taste and propriety suggest; it seeks to inspire terror by means that are not legitimate; and it fails from a want of probability, which ought not to have escaped so keen an intellect as that of Mr Collins".[39] The *Times* agreed that, "In spite of much excellent acting, and in spite, likewise, of considerable skill in the arrangement of the incidents, the subject was obviously repugnant to the audience".[40]

The *Daily Telegraph* review made one very pertinent point that was to prove useful to Collins: "All the sudden disclosures, the unexpected distortions, the impulsive actions, which disfigure the drama of "the Red Vial" could never have existed in the adaptation of the same material to the purposes of a written tale; it is, nevertheless, full of genius, of literary worth, of vigorous thought and inventive power …It should have been written in a series of chapters - not

---

[38] *Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1858.
[39] Ibid.
[40] *The Times*, 12 October 1858.

concentrated into three acts of no unusual length".[41] When Collins came to adapt his failed play into *Jezebel's Daughter* in 1880, he obviously remembered the reviewers' points, and took them into account. Clearly he also felt the story still had some mileage. *Jezebel's Daughter* is not a spectacularly good novel by any means, but it is not one of his worst. In the foreword, dedicated to Alberto Caccia, his Italian translator and agent, he presents him with "Two interesting studies of humanity" in Jack Straw and Madame Fontaine, and declares that "The events in which these two chief personages play their parts have been combined with all possible care, and have been derived, to the best of my ability, from natural and simple causes. In view of the distrust which certain readers feel, when a novelist builds his fiction on a foundation of fact, it may not be amiss to mention ... that the accessories of the scenes in the Deadhouse of Frankfort (sic) have been studied on the spot."[42] Later, Alberto Caccia managed a production in Italy of a much more successful Collins play, *The New Magdalen.*

The novel differs from the play most dramatically through the introduction of the character, Mrs Wagner, widow of the head of the English branch of a German merchant house. This is another of Collins's strong woman, who believes, as her late husband did, in employing women equally with men:

> My master's heresies of the year 1828 have become the orthodox principles of the year 1878. Thinking the subject over in his own independent way, he had arrived at the conclusion that there were many employments reserved exclusively for men, which might with perfect propriety be also thrown open to capable and deserving women. ... Enlarging his London business at the time, he divided the new employments at his disposal impartially between men and women alike. ...

---

[41] *Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1858.

[42] Collins, Wilkie. *Jezebel's Daughter*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1994, dedication.

> My master's audacious experiment prospered nevertheless, in spite of the scandal.[43]

She also agrees with her husband's views on the treatment of the insane. Hans Grimm becomes Jack Straw, rescued from Bethlehem Hospital. The Widow Bergman, now Madame Fontaine, is an altogether more evil villainess, along the lines of Lydia Gwilt from *Armadale*. By a curious and more effective twist than in the play, Jack Straw was inadvertently poisoned by Monsieur Fontaine which resulted in his madness and strange appearance.

Collins was humiliated by the failure of the play, but not utterly defeated. He had, this time, completely misjudged the tastes of the audience, which Henry Morley confirms; "The piece is the work of a popular writer, admirably mounted, perfectly acted, with the favourite actor of the day labouring his utmost in what should have been a striking part. Nevertheless it was condemned ... for a defect arising from misapprehension of the temper of an English audience."[44] Collins next attempted a one-act farce adapted from his short story 'The Twin Sisters' originally published in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1851. Although the story itself is serious and rather sad, he apparently adapted it "to keep the audience roaring with laughter all through". [45] It was written for Robson and Mrs Stirling, but was never taken up by them, with one unfortunate result for us being that a copy did not reach the Lord Chamberlain's collection. After that, busy with his novels, Collins did not write again for the theatre for some years.

---

[43] Ibid., p. 4.
[44] Morley, p. 191.
[45] Thompson, Julian, ed., *Wilkie Collins, The Complete Shorter Fiction*. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd., 1995, p. 7.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *BLACK AND WHITE*

Between the disastrous theatrical production of *The Red Vial* and Collins's next theatrical success, another collaboration with Dickens in 1867, several years elapsed. This is not entirely because Collins was dismayed by the reception of *The Red Vial*, although one would like to think he learned a lesson about playwriting from the fiasco of that production. The period in question was a very busy time for Collins. Between 1858 and 1866, he met Caroline Graves, who was to become his companion for many years; entered upon the most successful phase of his writing career with *The Woman in White* in 1860, *No Name* in 1862, and *Armadale* in 1866; and had also met Martha Rudd whilst researching locations in Norfolk, who was ultimately the mother of his three children, had moved her to London and established her in a house close to his own, and was expecting his first child by her. With the publication of *The Woman in White* in 1860, Collins became a household name.

*The Frozen Deep*, 10 years after its successful amateur run, was given its professional debut at the Olympic Theatre in 1866 under the management of Horace Wigan. Unfortunately, after an encouraging first night, it turned out to be unsuccessful. Collins wrote of its failure with the public to his close friend, Nina Lehmann, in these terms:

> The enlightened British public declares it to be '*slow*'. There isn't an atom of slang or vulgarity in the whole piece ... no female legs are shown in it; Richard Wardour doesn't get up after dying and sing a comic song; sailors are represented in the Arctic regions, and there is no hornpipe danced, and no sudden arrival of 'the pets of the ballet' to join the dance in the costume of Esquimaux maidens ... [1]

[1] Peters, p. 278.

Shortly after this production, in the early part of 1867, Collins began working with the French actor Francois-Joseph Regnier, an old friend at the Comèdie Française, on an adaptation of *Armadale* for the Paris stage, an exercise which eventually never reached production, though it did have a later influence.

Finally, at the end of 1867, Collins had another theatrical success. *No Thoroughfare* was a story written with Dickens for *All the Year Round*, with stage adaptation in mind; the story is presented with an Overture and three "acts". It was published as the Christmas number in December 1867, and dramatisation followed almost immediately, the play having been written simultaneously. It opened at the Adelphi Theatre, under the management of the actor-manager Benjamin Webster on 26 December 1867. It was a great success, ran seven months before going on tour, and was later revived at the Olympic Theatre in 1876.

The 1867 version of the play starred the actor Charles Fechter, with his leading lady, Carlotta Leclerq. Fechter played the lead role of the villain Obenreizer. Edward Dutton Cook highly praised his performance: "Mr Fechter's Obenreizer being an especially finished and vigorous performance".[2] Charles Fechter was a French actor whom Collins and Dickens first saw on a visit to Paris in the 1850s. Dickens and Collins used to take regular trips to Paris, and fit in as much theatre, opera and entertainment as possible.

---

[2] Cook, Edward Dutton. *Nights at the Play, A View of the English Stage.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1883, p. 31.

Collins was especially fond of France, the French, and most of all, Paris. The two writers much preferred the "naturalistic" acting of the French theatre to what they considered the "old-fashioned" English style, and were very impressed with Fechter at the time. Collins, writing an autobiographical sketch for an unknown recipient, had this to say both about *The Red Vial* and French Theatre:

> 'The Red Vial' was performed at the Olympic Theatre. It was not successful with the public, though greatly liked by the actors. I have written no other drama since, and my literary success has been entirely won as a novelist. If I had been a Frenchman – with such a public to write for, such rewards to win, and such actors to interpret me, as the French Stage presents – all the stories I have written from 'Antonina' to 'The Woman in White' would have been told in the dramatic form.[3]

Collins was also tremendously enthusiastic about French literature. He read much French popular fiction (including Dumas, Le Sage, and Pigault-Lebrun) as a young man, and could speak and read French fluently, if not always entirely accurately. His library contained numerous volumes in French, including the complete works of Diderot and Voltaire. He declared, "Excepting Falstaff and Dogberry, I think Molière a greater humourist than Shakespeare".[4] It was the novels of Balzac, however, that Collins enjoyed most, and which most strongly influenced his fiction. Andrew Gasson traces this influence: "Following Balzac's example, Collins took the melodrama of [Eugene] Sue's work and transformed it for serious social purposes".[5]

---

[3] Collins, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 208.
[4] Peters, p. 122.
[5] Gasson, Andrew. *Wilkie Collins, An Illustrated Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 63.

In 1859, Collins wrote an article in two parts entitled 'Portrait of an Author Painted By his Publisher', ostensibly a review of a book by Edmond Werdet (the publisher whom Balzac all but ruined), which was published in *All The Year Round*, on 18 and 25 June, and later reprinted in *My Miscellanies*. In these articles, Collins has a chance to speak of the French author whom he admires before all others. He bemoans the fact that England stands apart from a large number of countries who have been able to appreciate the genius of the writer; "Balzac is little known [in England] because he is little translated. ... Serious difficulties stand in the way of translating Balzac, which are caused by his own peculiarities of style and treatment. His French ... is a strong, harsh, solidly vigorous language of his own".[6] Collins must also, however, have a dig at the "moral" reviewers whom he has been slamming in his own prefaces: "Balzac lays himself open to grave objection (on the part of that unhappily large section of the English public which obstinately protests against the truth wherever the truth is painful)".[7]

In tracing Collins's account of the style of Balzac's writing, we see an echo of some of the reviews of Collins's own work; "The framework in which his idea is set, is always wrought with a loving minuteness which leaves nothing out".[8] As Gasson claims that "Balzac's subtle and profound understanding of women ... certainly influenced the creation of his own female characters" [9] so Collins himself discussed Balzac's

---

[6] Collins, Wilkie, *My Miscellanies*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1885, p. 266.
[7] ibid. p. 267.
[8] ibid. p. 267.
[9] Gasson p. 64.

understanding of, and appeal to women: "Women of all ranks and order have singled him out, long since, as the marked man, among modern writers of fiction, who most profoundly knows and most subtly appreciates their sex in its strength and its weakness."[10] Collins's early, and continued readings of French literature throughout his lifetime may have greatly influenced his own fiction, but Charles Fechter probably most greatly influenced the writing of his plays.

Charles Fechter was born in London in 1824, but brought up in Boulougne. He relentlessly pursued his calling of actor, and was a great success on the Paris stage; it was there that he created the part of Armand Duval in Dumas's *La Dame aux Camellias*, and also that of the dei Franchi twins in Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, a hugely popular piece on both sides of the Channel during the Victorian age. Having made his name in Paris, Fechter came to the London stage in 1860. His first performance was in the title role in *Ruy Blas* at the Princess Theatre. He was an immediate success; *The Times* reviewer was struck by the "small delicate touches by which he indicated his uneasiness ... fire of passion tempered by the feelings of respectful devotion ... concentration of passionate rage".[11]

Following his initial success, Fechter next turned to playing Shakespeare, thus fulfilling his ambition to perform the classics. He had a strong French accent, and his physical appearance has been described as "a fat, clumsy-looking figure with a very dark

---

[10] Collins, *My Miscellanies*, p. 265.
[11] Taylor, George, p. 93.

sallow face and close black hair".[12] However, this did not stop him from being a popular *Hamlet* in 1861, "in spite of his corpulence, his French accent and his startling blond wig".[13] His *Hamlet* was, and is, considered "one of the most influential performances of the century".[14] Dickens thought it was "a performance of extraordinary merit; by far the most coherent, consistent, and intelligible" he had ever seen.[15] Fechter's characterisation was also described by another witness as that of a "living human being ... Instead of delivering his words as if they had been learned by heart, [he] spoke them like an ordinary individual".[16] Though this is what the contemporary theatre-goer now expects, it was actually a revolutionary approach at the time. Apart from his acting style, the *Dictionary of American Biography* also states that he "inaugurated a revolution in stagecraft ... Before his time no one in England had devoted such attention and resource to the construction and equipment of the stage, the scenery, and other properties, and to costuming".[17]

Fechter's career on the London stage was relatively brief (from 1860 to 1869, when he departed for America), but his influence was great. Though it was not obvious at the time, a movement was beginning away from high melodrama and the big rhetorical gestures necessary for that style of writing, to a more intimate, thoughtful style of playing. Fechter can be said to have had more influence that any other actor of the time. By

---

[12] Kaplan, Fred. *Dickens, A Biography*. New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1988, p. 492.
[13] Peters, p. 288.
[14] Taylor, George, p. 93.
[15] Kaplan, p. 493.
[16] Peters, p. 288.
[17] *Dictionary of American Biography*, pp. 309-310.

contrast, Henry Irving was very much a man of his time and allied to the style of writing then prevalent in the theatre; he tried hard to give the public what it wanted, without extending the boundaries. Brilliant and inspired though Irving's acting talent may have been, there was eventually a rebellion against his acting style and the dramas he produced, a process begun by Shaw which continued into the 1890's, and which eventually left Irving destitute.

The acting style of Charles Fechter, however, had much more effect on a later style of writing, and he also influenced young actors like Arthur Pinero, who became an important playwright in the last decade of the century. One of several voices raised in praise of Fechter's style of acting was that of the young critic Clement Scott. Fechter's style was also close to that being developed by Robertson, as playwright, and the Bancrofts as actor-managers; Robertson's best work was, significantly, written in the 1860s. However, comparatively reactionary critics such as Lewes regretted "the loss of high passion".[18] Lewes's theories on acting can be summed up in his own words: "too close an approach to Reality in Art is shocking … the test of an actor's genius is not 'Fidelity to Nature', but simply and purely his power of exalting emotions in you respondent to the situation".[19]

Collins made use of his impression of Fechter's performance as Hamlet in *Poor Miss Finch* (1872); Nugent Duborg, one of the protagonists, gives advice to the vicar, Mr

---

[18] Taylor, George, p. 95.
[19] Ashton, Rosemary, ed. *Versatile Victorian. Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992, p. 30.

Finch who is reading from *Hamlet* to his family:

> That's not the way Hamlet would speak. No man is his position would remark that is was very cold in that bow-wow manner. What is Shakespeare before all things? True to nature; always true to nature. What condition is Hamlet in when he is expecting to see the Ghost? He is nervous, and he feels the cold. Let him show it naturally; let him speak as any other man would speak, under the circumstances. Look here! Quick and quiet - like this. "The air bites shrewdly" - there Hamlet stops and shivers - pur-rer-rer! "It is very cold." That's the way to read Shakespeare! [20]

Fechter developed a close relationship with Dickens and Collins. Collins and Fechter had much in common: they both loved good food and good company, and hated formality. Whilst Fechter lived in London, Collins was a regular visitor to his house in St John's Wood. However, Fechter's character was mercurial, and it is probably a testament to Collins's easy-going nature that he remained one of a few long-standing friends throughout Fechter's life. Fechter made friends easily but invariably quarrelled with them, probably because he was hopeless with money; he was always borrowing from one friend to lend to or pay back another. He was also possessed of a fearful temper, and great paranoia, and his stage fright was legendary.

Collins also immortalised Fechter by using parts of his character as a model for the bizarre creation of the legless villain, Miserimus Dexter, in his novel *The Law and the Lady*, written in 1875. Dexter, like Fechter, is multi-talented; he is sculptor, painter, musician (Fechter studied and was proficient at all three) and "actor"; his appreciation of

---

[20] Collins, Wilkie, *Poor Miss Finch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 108.

food is paramount; he considers (as both Collins and Fechter did) that "a man who eats a plain joint is only one remove from a cannibal - or a butcher" (p. 245).[21] When Valeria, the heroine of the novel, first meets Dexter, he is wildly travelling up and down in his wheelchair, first as Napoleon, then as Nelson; by way of explanation he tells her, "I have an immense imagination. It runs riot at times. I play the parts of all the heroes who ever lived. I feel their characters. I merge myself in their individualities. For the time being I *am* the man I fancy myself to be. I can't help it. I am obliged to do it ...". (p. 218)

*No Thoroughfare* is somewhat crude and melodramatic compared to Collins's other plays, but it had everything a Victorian audience could want: drama, passion, villainy, virtue, love, triumph over evil, and an avalanche scene. The story involves a wine merchant in London which is tied to a Swiss firm. The London house are worried about possible embezzlement by the Swiss proprieter, Obenreizer. George Vendale is sent to investigate, falls in love with Obenreizer's niece Marguerite, fights with the guilty Obenreizer during an avalanche, but is saved whilst the villain perishes. Cook had this to say about the play: "The authors have been at great pains to make their plot thoroughly intelligible to the audience … in this respect … perspicuity has been gained at the cost of dull prolixity".[22] There was a problem with what was seen as the excessive length of the piece, however; "It might be tolerably interesting if reduced to reasonable proportions … It is manifest that condensation must be brought about with a free and firm hand, if due

---

[21] This and subsequent quotes taken from the 1992 Oxford University Press edition of *The Law and the Lady.*
[22] Cook, p. 29.

consideration is to be paid to the powers of endurance of the public".[23] However, the public did not seem to agree, given the length of the run. After the triumph of *No Thoroughfare* on the London stage, Fechter and Dickens worked on translating it into French, with the title *L'Abime.* It was produced at the Vaudeville Theatre in Paris in 1868, but it was not a success; the French found it "crude and melodramatic".[24]

The next play which Collins wrote was a collaboration between Fechter and himself — *Black and White – A Love Story.* This is one of the few plays Collins had produced on stage that is completely original — it is not taken from a book or story, nor was it ever re-used as a book or short story. Years later, writing to Carlotta Leclerq, who expressed interest in reviving the piece, Collins explains the authorship of the play: "As to *Black and White*, the whole piece was written by me. Fechter suggested the subject and helped me with the scenario – and therefore thought it right that his name should appear with mine on the original playbills. Strictly speaking, the right (so far as Great Britain and Ireland are concerned) rests with me as the writer of the piece".[25] Fechter was very much a loose cannon in terms of his acting style, both at home and abroad – but given that his theatrical training was on the French stage, he was also very much steeped in the "well-made play" tradition and could contribute much to a playwright.

The play, with its story based on slavery (which was abolished in England and throughout the empire in 1833) and its dramatic awareness of climax and suspense, is

---

[23] Ibid., p. 30.
[24] Peters, p. 290.
[25] Collins. *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 408.

very much a "well-made play" in the English style. It is also melodramatic in character, in keeping with the English tastes of the time. However, it differs from the normal run of melodrama in that there are few stock characters, and there is, conversely, no question of "black and white", stereotypical characterisations. The hero is not all good, nor all bad; he has a journey to traverse through the play. The heroine is not all pure and good, especially in her thoughts; when she finds out the man she loves has black blood in his veins, she is initially repulsed, and has her own journey, which does not meet the usual melodramatic criteria. Both the authors are very careful of stereotyping, even in the stage directions, for example when describing a slave: "Wolf appears on the terrace, with Westcraft's cloak on his arm. His mulatto complexion and his dress mark him out strongly, but not ridiculously, among the other persons assembled".[26]

The influence of Boucicault must be acknowledged, if only because his own play on a similar subject, *The Octoroon*, was mentioned by reviewers:

> the incidents are not perhaps of the newest, for they bear a strong resemblance to others that have done duty on the stage before; but they have been composed with considerable artistic skill, and take a fresh shape from the mould in which they have been cast. The authors are no doubt indebted to Mr Dion Boucicault ... for some of the interest aroused by their work; but the obligation is not one that demands acknowledgement in the interests of literary justice. They may fairly call *Black and White* their own, though it may be doubted whether *Black & White* would ever have seen the day had it not been preceded by the *Octoroon*".[27]

---

[26] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *Black & White*, manuscript, British Library.
[27] *Daily News*, 30 March 1869.

*The Octoroon* was written in 1859, some ten years earlier. A brief summary of the plot is as follows: George Peyton inherits a plantation in Mississippi from his Uncle. Zoë, "the Octoroon", is the natural daughter of his Uncle and a slave, so she is half-caste; but she is a beautiful young woman, educated like a lady and brought up as their own daughter by his Uncle and his wife. McClosky, a neighbour, is in love with Zoë. Complications ensue when everyone realises that there is not enough money to run the estate, unless letters are received from the bankers in Liverpool. The family is forced to auction the estate. McClosky buys it, hoping thereby to buy Zoë as well, as she is technically a slave.

However, a photograph comes to light of McClosky killing a slave boy, Paul, whilst Paul was in the process of fetching the mail, including the eagerly awaited letters from Liverpool. McClosky is found out, and is killed by an Indian who was a good friend of Paul. Zoë, however, is not aware of this; she only knows that McClosky has acquired the estate, and therefore owns her. She chooses to kill herself by taking poison rather than submit to McClosky. George, therefore, does not marry the half-caste heroine.

The play was first produced in America in 1859, on the eve of the American Civil War. Notwithstanding the risky time and place to be producing such a play, it was a great success. Of course, American audiences considered the ending a normal, rational conclusion, because a white man could not be seen to marry a slave's daughter. It is interesting to note here that, in the best traditions of sensation novels, Boucicault makes use of the most up-to-date technology, in this instance the new camera.

When the play was brought to London and produced in 1861, British audiences were outraged that Zoë should die, and that both the hero and heroine, and the audience themselves, should be denied the obligatory happy ending. Boucicault held out, but finally gave in and changed it to a happy ending, in these terms:

> Mr Boucicault begs to acknowledge the hourly receipt of many letters, entreating that the termination of the *Octoroon* should be modified, and the Slave Heroine saved from an unhappy end. He cannot resist the kind feeling expressed throughout this correspondence, nor refuse compliance with a request so easily granted. A New Last Act of the Drama, composed by the Public, and edited by the Author, will be represented on Monday night. He trusts the Audience will accept it as a very grateful tribute to their judgement and taste, which he should be the last to dispute. [28]

This, with its facetious tone, sounds strikingly like Collins. The play was still hugely popular in England and a great success.

Eight years later came *Black and White*. The three act play opened on 29 March 1869 at the Adelphi under the same manager as *No Thoroughfare*, Benjamin Webster. Charles Fechter played Maurice, Count de Leyrac with his leading lady, Carlotta Leclerq, playing Emily Milburn, a plantation heiress in Trinidad. Mrs Leigh Murray was the slave, Ruth, to universal acclaim; "as Ruth [she] lives but to die, [and] dies well". For Mr G. Belmore as Plato and Mr E. Atkins as the servant, David Michaelmas, *The Times* praised the "quiet drollery" of their performances. Reviews were mixed about the character of Stephen Westcraft, enacted by Arthur Stirling, but more in terms of the characterisation than the acting; *The Times* declared that "we may doubt that Mr Westcraft, who is a sort of Legree, is a fair representative of a Trinidad creole (sic), but

---

[28] Thomson, Peter, ed. *Plays of Dion Boucicault*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2984, p. 45.

Mr. A Stirling well maintains the bluffness that is thrust upon him".[29] *The Daily News* also gave praise, but again with reservations about the character: "[he] gave a well-defined portrait of the vindictive planter, a little too well defined, perhaps at times, the outline being somewhat darkly drawn".[30]

The play is set in 1830, before the abolition of slavery. Maurice, Count de Leyrac, is a happy-go-lucky, privileged character without a care in the world. He seems outwardly shallow, flippant and fliratious, but he truly loves Emily Milburn, at first meeting a seemingly spoiled and petted plantation heiress, engaged to a neighbouring plantation owner. Emily describes how she regularly met the Count in Paris, where she had gone to take a sea voyage for her health:

> You needn't look at me, Jane, as if you thought I had encouraged him! I don't deny – when we met at balls – that we danced together, till the lady of the house separated us. But I never encouraged him! I don't deny that Fate always placed us together at supper. Who can control Fate? I don't deny that we constantly met, in the most unaccountable manner, in the daytime. But I am sure it wasn't his fault, and it certainly couldn't have been mine. How you stare! Don't you understand me? I wish I was dead! Do you understand that?

Shortly after this petulant tirade, the Count arrives in Trinidad at Miss Milburn's birthday party, having been invited by an arrangement which was flippantly made by both parties when they parted in Paris. The count, however, states that "I was never more in earnest in my life – as you see." Having greeted Miss Milburn, he then mistakes her fiancé, Stephen Westcraft, for her cousin:

---

[29] *The Times*, 2 April 1869.
[30] *Daily News*, 30 March 1869.

How stupid I am! Her cousin, of course! Delighted to make your acquaintance. It has been the dream of my life to see this superb island. I have read all about you. Your productions are sugar-canes, liquorice, cocoa, tobacco, pigs, parrots, musquitoes (sic), cockroaches, monkeys, rats. Shall I see them all, under your kind auspices? Yes, I feel assured I shall! (*To Miss Milburn*). I have taken a fancy to your cousin – I like his nice brown face.

In the next two scenes, Maurice's world is about to be shattered – he finds out he is adopted, and is really the son of a white man and a slave. In a dramatic and pathetic meeting with his mother, Ruth, she tells him the story little by little. She reveals that his father was a planter on the island, and his mother was a slave-girl on his father's estate. Maurice is shocked by this; "The one dream of my life has been to live worthy of my birth. Oh me – to what a reality I have awakened, if this woman speaks the truth!" Ruth asks if he blames his mother, to which he responds "God forbid", and asks if he is ashamed of her, to which he then replies "Be she who she may, my mother is sacred to me!". Ruth reveals herself and, having been reunited, she then dies in his arms. Unbeknown to him, he is overheard by both Emily and Westcraft.

The knowledge of his parenthood changes Maurice dramatically but understandably so — he can no longer act in the carefree, flippant and flirtatious manner to which he was accustomed. He is humbled, but still has his pride, which is in evidence later. Rather than rejecting Ruth and the story she has told him, although he would like not to believe her, he accepts his fate and declares his natural love for her, only to watch her die. Her warning to him, that he must leave the island, is his last concern; his first is for his mother as he declares that he cannot leave her; his second is for Emily.

At the beginning of the second act, when Maurice visits Emily the next morning it is his intention to tell her the truth and hope that she will love him still, ignorant as he is of the laws and rules of living with slavery. As he declares his love to her and kisses her, she succumbs to his will until their lips meet. At this point the stage directions are clear, as are her words: "(*He stoops and kisses her. The action causes an instantaneous feeling of revulsion in her. She sees the position in its true light – and breaks away from him, with a cry of horror*). What have I done? Am I mad? (*She covers her face with her hands).* Oh, the shame of it! The shame of it!". In his hesitation she has rushed in and lets him know that she is aware of his parentage, in no uncertain terms: "In this island, sir, a lady is degraded if a slave's hand touches her. A slave's lips have touched mine!". It is his intention to leave her, though she admits she loves him, and she is confused. As she hurries out of the room and he prepares to leave the house, such is the turn of events that Maurice believes himself to be honour bound to duel with Stephen Westcraft, little realising that Westcraft also knows the truth. The act ends in the public market place, with Maurice, bowed and subdued, declared a slave by Westcraft, whilst Emily declares her love for him.

Events move quickly in the third act, bringing the action to its final climax. Maurice's trusty servant, David Michaelmas, who was once a plantation owner on the island himself (in fact the owner of the estate to which Maurice would have belonged), is aware, as is Maurice, that there was a letter to Ruth from Maurice's father, of which no one knows the whereabouts or the content, and which was suppressed by his jealous wife. Whilst events move dramatically in the area of the market place (the estate to which

Maurice belongs is to be auctioned, and Westcraft wants to obtain it), Michaelmas is searching for the letter, with the help of a rather comical figure, a slave named Plato. Following a cryptic clue (reminiscent of a similar scene in Collins's own *The Dead Secret*, as the *Times* reviewer points out) the letter is discovered, the contents are revealed as giving Ruth her freedom (and therefore her children as well), and Michaelmas hurries back to town.

Maurice, given the opportunity to deny that he is a slave, because - as Miss Milburn puts it - "nobody besides Westcraft knows the truth - except our two selves" - will not deny his mother, and declares himself "the son of Ruth the Quadroon". It is now Miss Milburn's turn to show her noble side, having already overcome her own prejudices. When Maurice makes his declaration and the Provost marshal expresses his respect for his truthfulness, she herself declares, "He shall see that I can appreciate him too! Slave, or free, Maurice, take the hand I promised you; and make me your wife!" They are married, Westcraft obtains the estate, Michaelmas arrives in time to prevent Maurice's and Emily's separation, and Westcraft, having bought the estate through his lawyers, has lost every penny in his game of revenge.

In dealing with Miss Milburn's character and her initial repugnance to Maurice when she learns of his origins, the *Times* had this point to make, feeling that it was a defect that could have been prevented, though ultimately ignoring the sub-title of the play, *A Love Story*:

> Miss Milburn is a West Indian, educated in colonial prejudices, and, though these are overcome by her passion for Maurice, the almost physical repugnance which she betrays when she first discovers the secret of his

> birth shows that they have deeply entered into her convictions ... Nevertheless, when the curtain falls, she is to marry a man with black blood in his veins, and we are at liberty to doubt whether she will feel perfectly comfortable when she quietly reflects on this circumstance. ... The letter ... might as well have served to prove that Maurice was not the son of Ruth ... If the play were really directed against distinctions of colour, or even against slavery, and if it had been dictated by the spirit of "Uncle Tom" of course the defect would have had its origin in the essential motive of the authors. But such is not the case. The question of slavery never comes practically or verbally under discussion ..."[31]

Reviewers, however, were generally very well disposed towards the play. *The Times* called it "one of the neatest dramas of interest that has been seen for some time",[32] while *The Daily News* called it "a story which is told with remarkable closeness and skill ... the construction of the piece is singularly neat and effective".[33] *The Daily Telegraph* brings into play the merits of the joint authors:

> Mr Wilkie Collins, as a skilful manipulator of mysteries, would be sure to keep the curiosity (sic) of the spectators in suspense; and Mr. Fechter ... would be certain to embellish the progress of the story with those scenes of chivalrous devotion and tender love passages which he delineates with such remarkable earnestness and passion.[34]

The acting is warmly praised by all, as are the sets and general production values of the piece. Fechter's hand in the writing of the play is pointed out by this reviewer: "the opportunities for displaying the special talent of the performers are so freely afforded, that the drama yields a much greater amount of gratification than many pieces of higher pretension and more elaborate structure."[35] Dickens praised it as well, writing to Wills,

---

[31] *The Times*, 2 April 1869.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *Daily News*, 30 March 1869.
[34] *Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 1869.
[35] Ibid.

"There is no doubt that it ought to run, for it has real merit and is most completely and delicately presented".[36]

Although slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833, the question had been recently brought back to the minds of the public through the American Civil War (1861-1865). David Thomson points out that, "divisions of public opinion appeared in Britain over the American Civil War which broke out in 1861. The ruling classes … cherished strong sympathies for the southern aristocratic communities. … The working classes in general … say that slavery was an issue involved in the Civil War, and that the future of constitutional government and national unity lay with the forces of Lincoln and the North."[37] Clearly slavery was still a hot issue, and reviewers, at least, welcomed the new take on it through *Black and White*: *The Daily Telegraph* declared, "although the subject of slavery has been often discussed on the stage, and the social consequences of a distinction of race have been frequently illustrated by the playwright, few dramas based on a theme sure to stir the sympathies of a British audience have possessed greater merits than 'Black & White'".[38] *The Times*, though it had its reservations in terms of Miss Milburn's character, did finally declare, "to an exclusively European public devoid of sympathy with the sentiments prevalent in another hemisphere the defect to which we have referred will be scarcely perceptible, and such a public will

---

[36] Peters, p. 312.
[37] Thomson, David. *England in the Nineteenth Century*. London: The Pengiun Group, 1950, p. 158.
[38] *Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 1869.

admire without reservation the singular skill with which, out of the simplest materials, a drama perpetually rising in interest has been formed".[39]

After a successful first night and critical success, receipts thereafter were poor. The play ran for sixty nights but played to empty houses. Collins's opinion was that the public had suffered "an overdose of 'Oncle Tommerie' after the success of the many dramatisations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*".[40] Although these had been performed four years earlier, there were eight anonymous versions and eight acknowledged adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the years 1852-1853. Clearly the public had a long memory in this case, as did the reviewers, enthusiastic though they were, with their use of expressions like "a Legree" and "the spirit of Uncle Tom". A subsequent provincial tour was an even worse financial disaster: an observer reported that "at Manchester Fechter gave one of his best performances to the worst house ever known at the theatre".[41]

Collins sunk some of his own money into the production, to his regret; it was never a good idea to have any kind of financial relationship with Fechter. Shortly after this critically acclaimed but publicly unsuccessful production, Fechter left for the shores of America. The remaining years of Fechter's life are a sad story: soon after arriving in America he quarrelled with Carlotta Leclerq, and became estranged from her; her subsequent return to England and marriage there left him devastated with grief. Eventually he took up with Lizzie Price, a respected Philadelphia actress, who "became

---

[39] *The Times*, 2 April 1869.
[40] Peters, p. 315.
[41] Ibid., p. 315.

and remained his devoted slave",[42] and married her in 1874. It transpired, however, that he did so bigamously, having a wife, son and daughter in France. He had tried and failed to become a theatrical manager in New York, inevitably quarrelling with his associates. He died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1879 in poverty and isolation.

Collins's next play, produced only two years later, was his own adaptation of *The Woman in White.* Perhaps the writing of an original play with Fechter was a lesson he took with him into the most prolific part of his theatrical career. His plays thereafter became less melodramatic; partly because it was the style of the times, and partly because he was entering his best period as a dramatist, having spent many years learning this craft, through study (especially of the "well-made play") and through trial. Collins was no doubt greatly influenced by Fechter's acting style in his writing, as were others; the Bancrofts themselves would later produce one of Collins's plays.

---

[42] *Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 310.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

*The Woman in White* was, far and away, Wilkie Collins's most successful novel. Collins was as aware of this as anyone else; on his tombstone, at his behest, is inscribed, "author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction". Collins's dramatic adaptation of the novel was a hit, although very different from the novel. Today, it is this novel which is (along with *The Moonstone*) most appreciated by biographers and critics of Wilkie Collins's work. The novel has never been out of print, and it is the one book everyone knows; the mention of "Wilkie Collins" can sometimes draw blank stares, whereas mentioning *The Woman in White* brings immediate recognition. It will do so even more now, as there is currently a musical adaptation of the novel by Andrew Lloyd Webber in the West End, which takes great liberties with the novel.

From the first serial instalment, *The Woman in White* was immediately popular, and boosted the circulation of the Dickens's new periodical, *All The Year Round*, even higher than the previous serialised novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The serialised version of Collins's novel ran for forty episodes. It captured the public imagination like few other novels in the nineteenth century; biographers never tire of pointing out the "Woman in White" waltzes, perfumes, and articles of clothing which it inspired. It made Wilkie Collins, already a well-established writer, a household name. When the book form was issued in 1860, four editions were published in a month. Over Collins's lifetime sales ran into the thousands. Nuel Pharr Davis, in his biography of Collins, even goes so far as to claim "*The Woman*

*in White* was probably the most popular novel written in England during the nineteenth century".[1]

The triumph of *The Woman in White* not only added to Collins's status as a writer, and his popularity with the reading public; financially, he was offered an unheard of sum for his next novel. The publisher George Smith of Smith and Elder was initially invited to make an offer for the rights of book publication for *The Woman in White*. Collins, rightly believing the offer too low, turned to another publisher, and George Smith only realised too late the loss of a great money-making opportunity. He was not to let it happen again. Collins was committed to *All the Year Round* for his next novel in serial form, so Smith offered the sum of £5,000 for the novel following that (which was to be *Armadale*), to be serialised in his magazine *The Cornhill*. Collins wrote to his mother in these terms about the arrangement:

> [Smith and Elder] offer me ... for a work of fiction a little longer than *The Woman in White* ... to follow the story I am now going away to write for 'All the Year Round' - the sum of Five Thousand Pounds!!!!!! Ha! ha! ha! ... nobody but Dickens has made as much ... if I live and keep my brains in good working order, I shall have got to the top of the tree, after all, before forty.[2]

However the public may have reacted, not all contemporary critics were unanimous in praise of the *The Woman in White*. In the preface to the book edition, Collins made a reasonable request: "In the event of this book being reviewed, I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame

---

[1] Davis, Nuel Pharr, p. 216.
[2] *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 197.

him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second hand?"[3] In asking reviewers not to reveal the plot, he seems to have caused some critics to bristle, since it was the style of the lengthy book reviews of the nineteenth century to give a minute re-telling of the book. Some carping reviews resulted. One unsigned reviewer in the *Observer*, "having acknowledged that the story is 'more or less known to many readers', ... proceeded to offer 'a brief abstract of the fable' which in fact takes up five-sixths of his space and, in spite of Collins's prefatory plea, gives away the plot in considerable detail".[4] The reviewer continues: "the author has so overlaid his story with minute details, which are wholly irrelevant to the issue, that the reader ceases to feel any interest in that result before the work is half concluded".[5] This is quite at odds with the reaction of Gladstone, who cancelled a theatre engagement to go on reading it, or Thackeray, who "sat up all night reading it".[6]

*The Times* critic seems to have grudgingly agreed with Collins's request, then used it against him in the review: "if we are not to touch the story, what else is there to touch? Where is the vivid portraiture of character on which we are to dwell? Where is the life-like description of manners?"[7] *The Times* reviewer also famously pointed out Collins's own crucial mistake in the timing of Laura's departure for London, an error which Collins admitted to his publisher in a letter:

---

[3] O'Neill, Philip. *Women, Property and Propriety*. Basingstone: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1988, p. 98.
[4] Page, Norman, ed., *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 88.
[5] ibid., p. 88.
[6] Robinson, Kenneth. *Wilkie Collins: A Biography*. London: The Bodley Head, 1951, p. 137.
[7] Page, pp. 97-98.

"The critic in the Times is (between ourselves) right about the mistake in time".[8] It was corrected in subsequent printings of the book. However, Collins may have been too hasty to change the dates of, among other things, Laura's and Sir Percival's marriage (ensuring that it did not fall on a Sunday by checking an 1849 calendar), and generally "antedating the crucial Blackwater Park episode a whole 16 days", as John Sutherland points out in his article for the *Daily Telegraph* on the 22nd June 1996. Sutherland discusses the *The Times* reviewer's criticisms and Collins's corrections of the mistake. It seems, though, that in setting back the story, Collins now leaves Anne in the hands of the villain Fosco for a whole fortnight, possibly subject to "barbarous mistreatment, which may well have included sexual abuse", which "provoked her death from heart failure on 25 July". Sutherland's conclusion is that it is unlikely Collins made another chronological mistake, but "it is much more attractive to assume that he left the anomaly for his more detectively inclined readers to turn up. This reading elite should have the privilege of knowing just how subtle and evil the Napoleon of Crime, Count Fosco, really was".[9]

The contemporary review in *The Spectator*, on the other hand, was considerably more enthusiastic: "from his first page to his last the interest is progressive, cumulative, and absorbing". The reviewer goes on to disagree with other critics, particularly *The Saturday Review*: "what becomes of the assertion made by some critics, that it is an interest of mere curiosity which holds the reader

---

[8] *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 191.
[9] Sutherland, John, 'Mystery of the Missing Fortnight', *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1996.

so fast and holds him so long? The thing is palpably absurd."[10] It seems that every critic who took umbrage with his request not to reveal the plot gave the book an undeservedly bad review.

The *Guardian* was also more generous, and even defended his characterisation. After praising his evocative landscapes, the reviewer goes on to state that Collins can also create characters; "... this is true of the persons also. Each one is very clearly and distinctly, almost visibly, drawn". This review is one of the most positive, ending with the statement that "Mr Collins has constructed an original plot of rare intricacy, and has unwound the skein which he had knotted up with a lightness of touch and a patient industry, of which the modern novel furnishes us with very few examples".[11]

The plot for the novel was suggested by Maurice Mejan's *Recueil des causes célèbres*, a collection of records of French criminal trials, which Collins picked up at a bookstall on one of his pleasure trips to Paris. From one of the trial records, he gained the basic element of the substitution plot, which would place the heroine, Laura Fairlie, in the insane asylum, a victim of one who wants to gain her wealth by her "death". This was Collins's starting point, around which many of the other characters were incorporated into the plot. It was not even the vision of Anne Catherick, the striking and dramatic scene which begins the novel, which occurred to him first;

> ...in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me. ... There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road - there, as if it

---

[10] Page, p. 92.
[11] ibid., p. 91.

had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven - stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (p. 47).[12]

The novel combines the basic plot with a number of sub-plots, all of which (though it is not immediately apparent) support the main plot. The reader is kept in suspense about the many interweaving mysteries, and uncertain about just how they are all interconnected. Among the questions which arise in the mind of the reader through the course of the novel are: Who is Anne Catherick? This question plagues Walter and Marian from the opening of the story. What is her link with Sir Percival Glyde? What, then, is his secret? How is he linked with Mrs Catherick? What is her secret? How did Anne die, and how was Laura substituted in her place in the Asylum? How can Marian and Walter prove Laura's identity? Who is Fosco? Each mystery draws the reader along, and captures the imagination as each further mystery unfolds. Though *The Times* reviewer was harsh, he came up with an amusing simile:

> ...we are commanded to be silent, lest we should let the cat out of the bag. The cat out of the bag! There are in this novel about a hundred cats contained in a hundred bags ... Every new chapter contains a new cat. When we come to the end of it out goes the animal, and there is a new bag put into our hands which it is the object of the subsequent chapter to open. We are very willing to stroke some of these numerous cats, but it is not possible to do it without letting them out. [13]

Collins's characterisation is at his best in *The Woman in White*. The main characters are Walter Hartright, the hero; Laura Fairlie, the archetypal, blond,

---

[12] This and subsequent quotes taken from the 1996 Oxford University Press edition of *The Woman in White*.
[13] Page, p. 98.

blue-eyed heroine; Count Fosco, the remarkable and surprisingly likeable villain; and, possibly one of his best creations, the intrepid Marian Halcombe, Laura's half-sister. Though it is Hartright who speaks first, and moves the action along until just before the disastrous marriage of Laura to the wicked Sir Percival Glyde, Marian stands out almost immediately as a warm, well-drawn woman of interest and intelligence. Collins sets her apart in these words: "Her expression — bright, frank, and intelligent — appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete." (pp. 58-59) Clearly she is not a typical passive Victorian heroine, but more the kind of strong and intelligent woman with whom Collins had great sympathy.

Throughout the novel, Marian proves this again and again through her actions. One of the most notable circumstances is when, at some danger to herself, she crawls out on to the roof of the veranda to listen to an important conversation between Sir Percival and Count Fosco. In the event, it begins to rain and she catches the illness which, at the crucial moment, confines her to her bed. Marian's final act of defiance and fortitude, before Walter returns, is, through ingenuity and careful thought, to help her sister escape from the Asylum in which she was placed. Having done all she could, as a woman, on Laura's behalf to safeguard her interests, Marian has finally reached her breaking point, and Walter Hartright must return to continue the story, and avenge the wronged Laura.

Even more striking, and unique in Victorian literature, is the character of the primary villain, Count Fosco. He is almost likeable, both to the characters in

the novel and to the reader. He is a fat, jolly, personable man with a weakness for small animals and drinking sugar and water, and who, above all, seems to have a sincere admiration for Marian. It is difficult to fathom whether Fosco's feelings are "tongue in cheek" about Marian, or if he truly feels what he says for her. While Marian is sick, Fosco reads Marian's diary, which Collins has used to move the story along considerably. Fosco adds a "Postcript by a Sincere Friend":

> The tact which I find here ... the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian. ... Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe - how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME. The sentiments which animate my heart assure me that the lines I have just written express a Profound Truth. (pp. 358-359)

We can never quite be sure if this admiration is feigned or not, and Fosco's words could possibly be calculated for their effect on her, or just his "foreign" way of expressing himself. In any case, they would be considered offensive to a respectable Victorian woman. Marian receives a letter from him while they are in hiding, and finds "the insolent familiarity of the language ... too much for her self-control" (p. 469). When she later meets him, after their hiding place is discovered, she comes to believe that his admiration is real, as it is the only thing holding him back from turning Laura over to the Asylum authorities. Marian tells Walter, "the one weak point in that man's iron character is the horrible admiration he feels for *me*. I have tried, for the sake of my own self-respect, to disbelieve it as long as I could; but his looks, his actions, force on me the shameful conviction of the truth." (p. 568) This conviction totally unnerves her.

To the last, Fosco maintains his devotion; in the manuscript he prepares for Walter, as evidence of the dates required to restore Laura to her rightful position, Fosco declares, "Just Heaven! With what inconceivable rapidity I learnt to adore that woman [Marian]. At sixty, I worshipped her with the volcanic ardour of eighteen. All the gold of my rich nature was poured hopelessly at her feet. ... Such is the World, such Man, such Love." (p. 619)

Collins went against type in creating a fat villain - the Victorians equated the thin, sly-looking man with the villainous type, personified by someone like Uriah Heep in Dickens's *David Copperfield*: "He was high-shouldered and bony; … and had a long, lank, skeleton hand".[14] Collins himself created a thin villain in Mannion, the vengeful adulterer who pursues the eponymous hero of *Basil*, Collins's first novel, to the cliffs of Cornwall. Fosco, however, keeps white mice as pets who crawl about on his capacious waistcoat, dotes on his wife (though reading between the lines, we can see she is entirely under his control), and has an outwardly friendly demeanour. He charms most of those around him, including Mrs Michaelson, the housekeeper. In her section of the story, she states, "He had the manners of a true nobleman - he was considerate towards everyone. .. It is in such little delicate attentions that the advantages of aristocratic birth always show themselves." (p. 381) We see, however, that her good opinion is wholly due to his treatment of her, and his gratification of her pride: "The only person in the house, indeed, who treated me, at that time or at any other, on the footing of a lady in

---

[14] Dickens, Charles, *David Copperfield,* p. 275.

distressed circumstances, was the Count." (p. 381) Intelligent in every respect, he has to foresight to keep even the staff on his side.

Even Marian is unsure what to make of him at first: "If he had married *me*, I should have made his cigarettes, as his wife does - I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers." She has a strange fascination with him: "The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him. In two short days he has made his way straight into my favourable estimation, and how he has worked the miracle is more than I can tell." (p. 246) Even Walter is overwhelmed by him. "Sincerely as I loathed the man, the prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspects, impressed me in spite of myself." (p. 613)

The only time Fosco shows fear is when he is confronted with the meek and mild Pesca, whom we are later to learn has an interesting past. Walter decides to try if his cheerful little friend knows him, as they are both Italian. Pesca does not know Fosco, but Fosco knows him instantly; "there was no mistaking the change that passed over the villain's face. The leaden hue that altered his yellow complexion in a moment, the sudden rigidity of all his features, the furtive scrutiny of his cold grey eyes, the motionless stillness of him from head to foot told their own tale. A moral dread had mastered him body and soul - and his own recognition of Pesca was the cause of it!" (p. 591)

Pesca is a minor character, introduced in the first scenes of the novel (as well as the play), though he becomes central to obtaining a confession from Fosco. Amusingly, Collins seems to have made Pesca's physical description close to his

own: "Without being actually a dwarf - for he was perfectly well proportioned from head to foot - Pesca was, I think, the smallest human being I ever saw out of a show-room." (p. 35) You can also imagine his way of expressing himself is similar to that of Collins, with his exuberant love of life: "Pesca ... was dragging a large armchair to the opposite end of the room, so as to command us all three, in the character of a public speaker addressing an audience. Having turned the chair with its back towards us, he jumped into it on his knees, and excitedly addressed his small congregation of three from an impromptu pulpit." (p. 38) Collins may also, in developing the character of Philip Fairlie, have incorporated some of his own more annoying personal habits, in creating the complaining hypochondriac. His friends would most probably have recognised him.

*The Woman in White,* like several of Collins's novels, is closely concerned with doubles, or the "other self". Collins frequently used twins or doubles in his stories: his early short story, "The Twin Sisters" (published in 1851); in *Poor Miss Finch*, with the twins Oscar and Nugent Duborg; and most famously, the two Allan Armadales of *Armadale*.

The whole plot of *The Woman in White* revolves around the similarities between Laura and Anne. Walter is struck by the resemblance to the mysterious woman he met on the heath, on the first evening he meets Laura Fairlie:

> There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white! The doubt which had troubled my mind for hours and hours past flashed into conviction in an instant. That 'something wanting' was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and my pupil at Limmeridge House. (p. 86)

After Laura is helped to escape from the asylum, the resemblance becomes complete:

> the outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself. ... if they had both been seen together side by side, no person could for a moment have mistaken them one for the other ... I could not say this now. The sorrow and suffering which I had once blamed myself for associating even by a passing thought with the future of Laura Fairlie, *had* set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face; and the fatal resemblance which I had once seen and shuddered at seeing, in idea only, was now a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my own eyes. (p. 454)

Only later do we learn that they are half sisters. Collins used this likeness to his advantage when casting the play - one actress doubled both parts.

In the novel Collins excels at descriptive atmosphere. He draws great emotion from the scenery, and the light and shade of a scene. We can see, and feel, the "black shadows on the sluggish, shallow waters" when Marian first explores Blackwater Park; Marian's impression of Sir Percival's estate, is symbolised by the lake's "still, stagnant ... sluggish, shallow waters ... rank grass and dismal willows ...black and poisonous [water] ... frogs, rats ... snakes ... fantastically coiled and treacherously still ... solitude and decay ... gloom and barrenness". (all pp. 227-228). At Laura's gravestone, as Walter approaches, the "waning sun was shining faintly through thin white clouds ... overshadowed and saddened by the influence of the falling year". (p. 429) The reviewer in the *Guardian* commented on this facility: "Mr Collins possesses the talent of the

drawing-master who is his hero. He paints his scenes with a fullness and an accuracy which produces the effect of a stereograph."[15]

One of the most famous and arresting scenes in Victorian literature is that when Walter Hartright meets Anne Catherick, the Woman in White, in "the wild and mysterious light" (p. 46) of Hampstead. Dickens said that "the scene in which Anne Catherick bursts on an astonished Walter Hartright in the deserted Hampstead road was one of the two best moments in nineteenth-century literature".[16] Surprisingly, this dramatic scene was not used by Collins in his own play.

The play is in marked contrast to the novel. As with that gripping opening scene, Collins cut out all the essentially visually dramatic scenes of the novel from the play. There are many others which would make good theatre, including the appearance of Anne on the opposite side of the lake at Blackwater Park, when she is seen by Laura and Marian; the tombstone scene; and the episode with the burning church which culminates in the death of Sir Percival, and where Walter tries to save him. All of these scenes would have been strongly melodramatic on stage and so would have appealed greatly to the theatre-going public. They could have been developed in the vein of Dion Boucicault's plays, with their spectacular train wrecks and drownings.

Collins also cuts a number of characters, whom he evidently does not consider to be important for his dramatic interpretation of the novel. Those

---

[15] Page, p. 16.
[16] Peters, p. 208.

considered expendable are Hartright's mother and sister, Laura's and Marion's old governess Mrs Vesey, their uncle Frederick Fairlie and his valet, the lawyer Mr Gilmore, Anne Catherick's, friend Mrs Clements, the housekeeper, Eliza Michaelson, the doctor, Mr Dawson, Mr & Mrs Rubelle (Fosco's spies), and Hester Pinhorn, the illiterate servant girl who gave evidence of "Laura's" death. Wherever these characters had evidence to give in the novel, the story is told as necessary by other members of the cast. There is also none of what might be considered today to be "melodramatic" passion, as when Laura says to Marian, after Sir Percival has forced her to keep her engagement, "If I die first, promise you will give him [Walter] this little book of his drawings, with my hair in it. ... And say - oh, Marian, say for me, then, what I can never say for myself - say I loved him!" (p. 195)

The novel was published in 1860, but Collins's version of the play did not appear until 11 years later, in 1871. By this time, public taste was changing and in theatre there was a move towards realism, in which Collins was already playing a part. This was also his most prolific decade as a dramatist. Even the poster for the production, created by the eminent artist Frederick Walker, was part of the new spirit of the theatre; this poster "can almost be said to mark the birth of modern English poster art".[17] Walker himself said, "I am bent on doing all I can with a first attempt at what I consider might develop into a most important branch of art".[18] Collins may also have changed the plot so dramatically from his novel

---

[17] Robinson, p. 230.

[18] Marks, John George. *Life and Letters of Frederick Walker, ARA.* London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1896, p. 232.

because there had been two pirate productions which appeared shortly after the publication of the novel, at the Norwich Theatre, in January 1861 and at Sadlers' Wells in August 1861. In November 1860 Collins had actually convinced the management to stop one pirate production at the Surrey Theatre.

The production at Sadlers' Wells, an anonymous adaptation, was a play in two acts. This pirated play follows the novel fairly closely, adding a few conventions of the contemporary stage, like a passage of flirtation between the servants, Louis and Fanny. The first scene takes place at Walter's mother's house, as in the novel, with Pesca telling them of the employment he has found for Walter; the second scene captures the meeting on Hampstead Heath. For purposes of condensation, Anne Catherick immediately declares she is trying to get to Limmeridge, that she knew Mrs Fairlie, and that "her little girl is going to be married - oh, I hope not, I hope not."[19] The third scene is the mock love scene between Louis and Fanny. The fourth scene is in the school room, where the author uses the passage from the novel between Dempster, the headmaster, and the boy, Jacob Postlethwaite, who declares he saw a woman in white in the churchyard, which he believed to be a ghost. The remaining scenes of the first Act move the play forward to the curtain, where Laura faints into Walter's arms after receiving a letter from Anne warning her about her marriage.

The second act follows the story of the novel, with necessary abridgement to fit the play into two acts; the climax of the second act is the burning church and the death of Sir Percival. In the second act, however, the author does no justice to

---

[19] *The Woman in White*, anonymous manuscript, British Library.

the character of Fosco, and the scene where Walter wrests a confession from him is decidedly weak. The play moves inevitably towards the end and the vindication of Laura as Lady Glyde and the mistress of Limmeridge.

This piece is a well-crafted little play, but, though it uses two of the most striking scenes, the meeting in Hampstead at midnight and the burning church, it in no way captures the truly dramatic essence and rapid movement of the novel. It becomes very much a period piece, and loses the power of the original. Perhaps Collins realised this himself, and responded to it when he came to adapt his own novel for the stage.

Collins's production of his play opened on 9 October 1871 and ran for almost five months, to 24 February 1872, at the Olympic Theatre, under the management of William Henry Liston, son of the highly acclaimed comedian, John Liston, who had the distinction of being the highest paid actor of his time (he retired in 1837). Initially the well-known actor George Vining played Fosco, by far the most impressive role; Collins wanted Charles Fechter to play it, but he was engaged elsewhere. Eventually, during the subsequent tour, Wybert Reeves, a young, up and coming actor who became a close friend of Collins, replaced Vining, and made an even greater success of the part. Collins was decidedly relieved by the loss of Vining, having had much trouble with him both during the London run and especially on tour; Vining wanted to make changes to his part which Collins would not accept. He writes to William Tindell, his solicitor,

"Vining gives up the tour. You will have the agreements to burn in a few days –

the performances under his direction not having even produced money enough to pay for the drawing of the agreements!!! Pleasant – isn't it?".[20]

Vining received mixed reviews for his performances, as noted in one of the programmes for the production. The reviews were carefully chosen for their complete contradiction to one another, and the collection of the "Opinions of the Press" is preceded by the title, "Mr. Vining As Count Fosco. If you want a hearty laugh, read the following". Reviews from all the major papers are quoted one after the other, the first in praise and the second in condemnation: "It is painful to be compelled to record the fact that the Fosco of Mr Vining, admirable as the actor is in many ways, is one of the most elaborate failures in the way of dramatic art, which have been seen in recent times" (*Daily News*). "Mr Vining was immensely popular, and received with the most flattering reception" (*Standard).* "We want the soft voice and a certain colouring which Mr Vining cannot give. He certainly looked the character thoroughly, but was not Count Fosco" (*Daily Telegraph*). "The character of Count Fosco … finds a very clever delineator in Mr Vining. … it is unquestionably one of the best [parts] he has ever taken" (*Echo*). "Mr Vining's Fosco at the Olympic is as bad as it can be" (*Illustrated Times*). Collins responds very diplomatically underneath the long list of newspaper quotes: "I have read with regret the sentence which pronounces Mr Vining to be 'not Count Fosco'. The difficulties in the way of presenting this character on the stage are enormous. … his representation of the part thoroughly satisfies me".[21] Although

---

[20] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 352.
[21] Playbill, *The Woman in White*, Theatre Museum.

privately he may have had his reservations about Vining, at least publicly he gave his leading actor his full support.

The play was a box office and critical success. The critics were almost unanimous in their praise of Collins's skill: the *Times* declares on 10 October 1871, "He has firmly grasped the rarely appreciated truth, that situations which appear dramatic to a reader, are not necessarily dramatic when brought to the ordeal of the footlights".[22] The play also did well in the provinces and in America for several years after. Edward Dutton Cook found the first two acts "good examples of the author's adroitness in connecting his incidents and condensing the interviews of his characters … the second act is especially to be noted for the dramatic effect with which it is invested, and the artistic ingeniuty of its scenic contrivances. It was received with tumultuous applause".[23] Collins himself wrote of the success of the piece to his friend, Charles Reade, "The business promises famously. Receipts of the first week £475 – which gives a good profit to those interested at starting. This week's returns, steadily larger every day than last week's".[24]

In the play, Walter Hartright is more of a presence, more of an active "hero", from the start. In the novel he cannot be the hero until he goes away to the tropics; there he faces manly dangers and several times escapes death. When we first meet him in the novel, Hartright says himself, after Pesca tells him of the job offer: "that by so doing he was to turn the whole current of my existence into a

---

[22] Peters, p. 334.
[23] Cook, E.D., p. 171-72.
[24] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 348.

new channel, and to alter me to myself almost past recognition". (p. 37) Walter's journey through the novel is thus one from passivity to strong activity. He even describes himself thus at the opening of the story: "I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them." (p. 89) Even Marian appears stronger than Hartright; when she tells him of Laura's engagement, and that he must leave Limmeridge House, she reminds him how to behave like a man: "Crush it! ... Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!" (p. 96)

Collins's play begins with a Prologue, which takes place at Old Welmingham Church; the churchyard is stage left, and the vestry interior is stage right. Anne meets Sir Percival, telling him how she knew Mrs Fairlie and why she wears white. Sir Percival speculates immediately that she and his fiancée are half sisters, in this exchange:

> Anne: Do you know Miss Fairlie? Are we like each other still?
>
> Sir P. (*to himself, interested for the moment)*. They are as like as two peas. And Miss Fairlie is said to be the image of her father! The captain's character was notorious among women; Mrs Catherick must have had attractions in her time –
>
> Anne (*repeating her question*). Am I like Miss Fairlie now she has grown up?
>
> Sir P. (*pursuing his thought*). Are they half-sisters without knowing it?[25]

[25] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman in White, a Drama in Three Acts*. London: privately published, 1871.

Mrs Catherick enters and they enact the scene in which he pays her for the key to the church.

Hartright and Pesca enter, who are on a walking and sketching holiday. There is a brief history of Pesca's secret society, and he tells Walter he has had a letter from them saying he must identify someone who has betrayed the society, who will therefore be assassinated. Though Pesca is as "uneasy" in the play, as is expressed in the novel: "Let me remain free from a responsibility which it horrifies me to think of - which I know, in my conscience, is not *my* responsibility now." (p. 598) In the play Pesca declares, "Horrible! If I say the word, he is doomed; no human laws can save him! [he reads a description of Fosco also giving his name] Heaven grant – when I see him – I may not recognise the man!" Pesca also has a letter confirming Walter's employment at Limmeridge House. To wind up the prologue, Sir Percival relates the story of his parents not having been married at his birth while he changes the registry entry. Anne is watching, then reveals herself, and is caught by Mrs Catherick who silences her. The effect of the prologue is to reveal the history behind the story.

Act I begins at Limmeridge Park, in the Summer House. Marian and Walter are discussing his love for Laura; she tells him of Laura's engagement, and that he must leave. Laura enters, and they part sadly. She gives him her sketchbook. Laura and Marian depart, and Anne enters. Walter, like everyone else in the play, is immediately struck by her likeness to Laura; "Am I dreaming? Am I mad? The living image of Laura Fairlie!" She gives Walter a letter for Laura about Sir Percival, tells him about her confinement in an asylum, and intimates

that Sir Percival put her there. She departs, and Fosco enters, encounters Walter briefly, who then departs. Anne reappears distraught, Fosco hides her, and lies to two men from the asylum who are chasing her. He realises at this point that Sir Percival had her committed, and muses on the fact that both their fortunes depend on the marriage taking place between Sir Percival and Laura. Sir Percival reappears incensed because Laura has tried to release him from their engagement. Laura and Mme Fosco arrive, and Fosco, meeting her for the first time, is, as well, struck by her resemblance to Anne:

> Fosco (*starting back*). That is Miss Fairlie!!
>
> Madame Fosco. What is there to be surprised at?
>
> Fosco (*confusedly*). Nothing, nothing! (*He controls himself, bows to LAURA, and drawing back towards the door on the left, continues aside.*) The fugitive from the lunatic asylum over again! The double of the woman whom I have got hidden in here!

Act II takes place at Blackwater Park. The ingenious set design consists of the outside of the house with a veranda below and the first floor bedroom windows above, but the audience can also see into the drawing room and the study. By this time Laura has been married a month, and Marian is visiting her. They converse briefly and depart. It is then made clear that Anne is being "cared for" by loyal agents of Fosco in London, and that she trusts the Foscos.

Laura and Marian then return, and Laura refuses to sign the paper giving her husband control of her money, as in the novel. Marian and Laura converse out of their windows, then Marian tries to listen to Fosco and Sir Percival on the veranda. She eventually creeps into the study, but is caught by Fosco and doesn't

hear any more. Anne then enters, but hears Sir Percival's voice and faints. Fosco lays her on sofa and is again struck by her resemblance to Laura, who had been lying in the same place earlier. He is then inspired to form his plan, and explains it to Sir Percival, who is bewildered. Fosco shows him the sleeping figure of Anne.

Act III, sc. i. takes place in the Picture Gallery of Blackwater Park the next day. Marian and Laura have played into the hands of Fosco, with Marian saying she will go to their uncle, leaving Laura alone with them. Act III, sc. ii. is set in the Smoking Room at Blackwater Park, three days later. Sir Percival relates in soliloquy the basic elements of the plot, but says that Anne died (a day too early) as Lady Glyde. Laura is to be decoyed to London, thinking she is going on to Limmeridge, and Fosco will take her to the asylum as Anne. When it comes to the point however, when Sir Percival must send Laura to London, he appears to be considerably more conscience-stricken than in the novel; he cannot look her in the eye or say a proper goodbye. After Laura departs for the station, Sir Percival muses in soliloquy, "(*pacing the room in violent agitation*). It's an infernal shame! It's worse than killing her outright to shut her up in the asylum for the rest of her life. I'll call her back! (*He takes a step towards the left, and checks himself*). It's too late to call her back; no help for it now but to go on to the end". Philip, the servant, enters, telling Sir Percival that a bailiff has arrived from Welmingham. Percival realises he has been betrayed by Mrs Catherick, and escapes through the back of the stage.

Act III, sc. iii. is a very dramatic scene, the climax of the play. It takes place in the Waiting Room of the asylum. Fosco and the Matron are discussing a letter from Marian saying she wants to see "Anne". Fosco does not want Marian to see Laura without preparing her. Marian and Walter enter, and discuss the death of Sir Percival as he attempted to cross to France in a fishing boat. Marian vows vengeance for Laura's "murder" and asks for Walter's help. Fosco enters and Marian is horror-stricken. He threatens Walter, and Marian agrees to see him alone. Fosco, trying to prepare her for the shock of what she is about to see, declares, "While you stand there, you are standing at the gate of the grave! The dead will walk out on you!". He departs, Walter returns, and Laura enters. Collins used the same strong and evocative language in the novel; "in that moment Miss Halcombe recognised her sister - recognised the dead-alive." (p. 441)

Act IV, sc. i. is set at the Village Inn at Limmeridge. Marian, Laura, Walter, and Pesca discuss the situation with the lawyer, Mr Kyrle. He advises patience as neither the village people nor her relatives will recognise Laura. Walter asks Pesca if he has ever encountered Fosco and he says he did once see him in London. Walter reminds Pesca of the letter from the secret society, and that the Count is Italian, and a spy. He wants to see if Fosco knows Pesca. Pesca says it is extremely dangerous, but Walter asks for this in the name of friendship. Fosco enters and is terrified at the sight of Pesca. Walter asks Pesca to "arm me with the terror you have inspired in that man" - his only weapon. Pesca relents.

Act IV, sc. iv. takes place Fosco's drawing room, that night. This scene follows the novel exactly, using the same dialogue. Fosco gives him the necessary

proof, a telegram confirming Laura arrived after Anne had died. At this point Walter almost warns him of his fate, but decides against it. Two men lurk upstage, who enter when Walter departs and stab Fosco.

The action of the play is compressed into six months, and takes place in only four localities: Old Welmingham, Limmeridge, Blackwater Park, and Fosco's house. It does, however, keep all the important elements of the story, and not just the basic plot. These include Sir Percival's secret, and Mrs Catherick's assistance; the fact that Laura and Anne are half sisters; Pesca's membership of the unnamed Italian society; Laura's and Walter's love; Percival marrying Laura for money; Laura's refusal to sign any papers without reading them; and of course, Fosco's and Sir Percival's plan, and the fact that Anne dies a day too early.

Collins took a very clever novel and turned it into a clever play. The adaptation became less of a Mystery, and more of an atmosphere play; "the tension comes from dramatic irony, rather than mystification".[26] The plot also becomes more important than the love story, as there is no "happy ending " with Walter and Laura's marriage. The last scene the audience is left with is the murder of Fosco.

Collins may have had it in mind to change his plot drastically for the stage, and he was certainly trying to distance his adaptation from the various pirate productions, as evidenced by his own words below. He may also have felt that, eleven years later, the novel was so well known that there could be no surprises for

---

[26] Peters, p. 334.

the audience. On the cover of the programme he wrote his justification for the changes made to the novel in his adaptation for the stage:

> Mr Wilkie Collins begs leave briefly to submit to the Public the objects which he has had in view in altering his novel, called "THE WOMAN IN WHITE", for representation on the stage. In the first place, he has endeavoured to produce a work which shall appeal to the audience purely on its own merits as a play. In the second place, he has refrained from making the interest of his drama dependent on mechanical contrivances, and has relied in the play, as he relied in the novel, on the success of incident, on the exhibition of character, and on the collision of human emotion rising naturally from those two sources. To reach the ends thus indicated – ends not attained, he ventures to think, by previous adaptations of the book to stage purposes, written without the author's knowledge and consent – he has not hesitated, while preserving the original story in substance, materially to alter it in form. … This method of treatment has necessarily resulted in much that is entirely new in the invention of incident and in the development of character.[27]

Interestingly, however, he was to make drastic changes of the same kind to *The Moonstone* in 1877, although there had been no recorded pirate productions of that novel. The play version of *The Woman in White*, as with all the other Collins dramas to be published, was privately printed.

---

[27] Collins, Wilkie, programme notes for *The Woman in White* at the Olympic Theatre; programme in The Theatre Museum, Covent Garden archives.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *MAN AND WIFE*

By this point in his career as a dramatist, the kind of drama Collins favoured is clear; he could have adapted his novels into high melodrama, which would meet all the requirements of that particular style (à la Boucicault), but instead chose to present simple and more naturalistic pieces. From the adaptations of his most popular and widely read novels for the stage, from *The Woman in White* through to *The Moonstone* in 1877, all the superstitious and mysterious elements are removed and "stripped bare" to create a style of piece that was becoming more and more popular in the theatre, and more similar to the French, well-made play.

When he came to write his next novel in 1869, *Man and Wife*, Collins originally conceived it for the stage. He writes to his friend, Joseph Charles Parkinson, "I am putting my story together (this time) in the dramatic form first".[1] However, he changed his mind and completed the novel first, mostly because the subject matter was not proving as "light" as he wished it to be for the stage, and also, as he wrote to John Hollingshead, because he was still unsure of his skill as a dramatist; "As a novelist, I can hold my audience, when I have once got them, and lead them (whether they like it or not) to the end. As a dramatist, I am not equally sure of the ground I walk on."[2] But after the success of his original play created with Fechter, *Black and White*, and also of his own adaptation of *The Woman in White* in 1871, Collins must have finally felt he was on the right track with his dramatic writing.

---

[1] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 324.
[2] Peters, p. 314.

The structure of the novel is divided into a Prologue, sixteen scenes, and an epilogue. The novel, however, is much broader in conception, and from this was lifted the much simpler play. This novel was initially included among the five best of Collins's novels by contemporary critics, and was written during his strongest period (the 1860s), but is not as highly considered now. Most modern critics disparage his later novels, from 1870 onwards (and he was to live almost a further twenty years) as a group, but there is much to be gained and enjoyed from reading some of his later works.

Collins took as his two main themes, for the novel and the play, an attack on the marriage laws, particularly of Scotland, and a critical view of the current fashion for "muscular Christianity". The vogue for Muscular Christianity was spreading through the public schools and universities of England, and was espoused by such figures as the writer Charles Kingsley. Kingsley meant well, and had great sympathy with the poor and downtrodden. He embraced a physical existence: cold baths in the morning which he believed would decrease a man's appetite for strong drink; the building of muscle and brawn, "ready with their fists to defend a good cause or to help a fellow-being in distress".[3] Norman Vance has called the essence of the heroes of Kingsley's later novels a sort of "good-natured brutality".[4] Other critics of the vogue for Muscular Christianity stated that, "provided a young man was sufficiently brave, frank, and gallant, he was more or

---

[3] Newson, David. *The Victorian World Picture*. London: John Murray, 1997, pp. 159-160.
[4] Ibid., pp. 159-160.

less absolved from the common duties of morality and self-restraint".[5] Collins, however, felt that building up of muscle instead of brain was at the expense of the finer sensibilities of man, and that man became a mere brute. In the preface to the novel, he states,

> As to the moral results [of Muscular Christianity], I may be right or I may be wrong, in seeing as I do a connection between the recent unbridled development of physical cultivation in England, and the recent spread of grossness and brutality among certain classes of the English population. … Is no protest needed, in the interests of civilisation, against a revival of barbarism among us, which asserts itself to be a revival of manly virtue, and finds human stupidity actually dense enough to admit the claim?[6]

In the character of Geoffrey Delamayn Collins creates a loutish, brutish, ill-natured man obsessed with horses, gambling, and his own physical prowess.

The original starting point, however, for the play/novel was an attack on the unfairness of the marriage laws of England, Scotland and Ireland. Collins acquainted himself with as much knowledge as he could of the subject, through his own remembrances of his legal education and by asking his solicitor for advice on the question. Thus Collins could state in his preface, "the fiction is founded on facts … As to the present scandalous condition of the Marriage Laws of the United Kingdom, there can be no dispute. The Report of the Royal Commission, appointed to examine the working of those laws, has supplied the solid foundation on which I have built my book". He was also to state, "there is a prospect, at last, of lawfully establishing the right of a married woman, in England, to possess her

---

[5] Kendall, Guy. *Charles Kingsley and His Ideas*. London: Hutchinson & Company Limited, date, p. 177.
[6] Collins, Wilkie. *Man and Wife* (Oxford University Press 1995 edition), pp.xiv-xv.

own property, and to keep her own earnings."[7] Though the first Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1870, the problem was not fully addressed until the passage of the second Married Women's Property Act in 1882.

Divorce was another subject close to Collins's heart – strange that a man who so assiduously avoided marriage at all costs, though not his obligations to the women in his life, should be so concerned and knowledgeable about the inequality towards women in the Divorce and Marriage laws of the country. In 1857, divorce was removed from the church courts to the civil courts, but a wife was still obliged to prove 'aggravated enormity' on the part of her husband, while a man could simply obtain a divorce on the grounds of adultery. Collins was to examine the divorce question more closely in his later novel, *The Evil Genius* in 1886, another book which he also intended to put on the stage.

Collins not only had detailed knowledge of marriage laws through his studies and through questioning his learned friends, but he had personal experience of the devastation divorce could cause a woman. One of his close friends, Frances Dickinson (Collins had many women friends) had suffered through a trying marriage and ignominious divorce. She acted in the summer productions of *The Frozen Deep,* taking over the part of the Scottish nurse, "typically courageous – or foolhardy – of her to expose herself in public".[8] It took a ten year, very public, very messy legal battle to free herself from her adulterous and cruel husband, during which time friends turned their back on her, though she

---

[7] Ibid., p. xiii.
[8] Peters, p. 173.

was completely innocent. Collins wrote a story in *Household Words*, 'A New Mind', addressing the issue:

> At that time, England stood disgracefully alone as the one civilised country in the world having a divorce-law for the husband which was not also a divorce-law for the wife. … she was indebted to the accident of having been married in Scotland, and to her subsequent right of appeal to the Scotch tribunals, for a full and final release from the tie that bound her to the vilest of husbands which the English law … would have mercilessly refused.[9]

Frances Dickinson, however, did not seem to have learned any lesson from her misadventures; having managed to overcome the major social stigma of being a divorced woman, she then 'married' (though the marriage was later proved to be false) a mysterious doctor between 1855 and 1863. Dickens, also a good friend by this time, warned Collins to keep her past under wraps; soon after she married the very respectable Dean of Bristol. But by 1872, when Collins dedicated *Poor Miss Finch* to "Mrs Elliot, of the Deanery, Bristol", she was trying to escape from that marriage, though Dickens was trying to mediate between the two; she eventually managed to extricate herself once again, and thereafter lived mostly abroad, writing fiction and history. The stuff of real life is at least as interesting as Collins's "far-fetched" fiction.

*Man and Wife* was well received, greatly increasing the circulation of *Cassell's Magazine* in which it was serialised from January to June 1870. It also did well on the stage, both in England and America, which is attested to by the reviews of the play, although there were the now familiar criticisms about

---

[9] Ibid., p. 174.

propriety: "its story ... is interwoven with no small amount of exciting incident, while its closing scenes clearly overstep the limits of refined art. *Man and Wife*, the 'dramatic story', however, offends but little in this way".[10]

*Man and Wife*, opening on 22 March 1873, was the first new play the Bancrofts had put on for some years, and this was the first time they had broken away from their usual style of light comedy to present a serious drama. At this point the Bancrofts had been in the Prince of Wales for eight years. New work was essential to avoid stagnation, and to keep their operation innovative and financially successful. Robertson died in 1871, so into the quiet but effective theatrical revolution of the Bancrofts came Wilkie Collins, a writer, both on stage and page, who was very much in sympathy with the naturalistic style of acting they espoused.

Collins in rehearsal was the reasonable person a man of such an easy-going nature might be expected to be. During rehearsals for *The Woman in White* Wybert Reeve remembers, "I marvelled at him, for authors as a rule are … the reverse of patient when attending the rehearsals of a piece they have written".[11] As noted above, Collins had problems with George Vining after the London run of *The Woman in White*; when Vining was released from the agreement and the rights to tour were given to Reeve, Collins, always willing to listen to a reasonably

---

[10] *Daily News,* 24 March 1873.
[11] Reeve, Wybert, "Recollections of Wilkie Collins", *Chambers Journal*, p. 458.

presented argument, did eventually agree to exactly the changes that Vining had wanted to make.

When he attended rehearsals at the Prince of Wales, Collins deferred to the Bancrofts' theatrical experience at every turn. He was still careful, remembering his experience with Vining, when drawing up a contract with Ada Cavendish for *The New Magdalen* later in the same year, 1873:

> No alterations of any sort are to be made in the dialogue without my permission. The play is to be produced under my directions. The cast of characters, the scenery, and the dresses are to satisfy me – or failing that I am to have the right of withdrawing the play. If the continuous run of the play is interrupted it is to be left to my discretion to resume the performance of it at the Olympic theatre or not. Proofs of the posters play bills and of all other advertisements are to be submitted to me – and I am to have the right of altering adding to or cutting out any words or expressions to which I may object.[12]

However, he was to become firm friends with Ada Cavendish and to remain so for the rest of his life, and, as with the Bancrofts, in production he always deferred to the actress's experience. Ada Cavendish was also to produce *Miss Gwilt* in 1875.

Expectations were running high; everyone in literary and artistic London wanted to be at the first night. Reviewers were keen to see if the Bancrofts were departing from their usual bill of fare: "the inference that Miss Marie Wilton was about to invite her guests to rather coarser fare than they have hitherto been accustomed to was on the whole justifiable ... The first performance ... has,

---

[12] Jackson, p. 326.

however, served to reveal the fact that the character of the entertainments at the Prince of Wales's stands after all pretty nearly where it was".[13] Collins clearly enjoyed the immediacy of theatrical presentation, although he suffered as much, if not more, than the most sensitive actor from first night nerves; on the opening night, he was overwhelmed by nervous terror and spent the entire evening in Squire Bancroft's dressing room. But he had nothing to worry about, as he later told Wybert Reeve of his reception at the end of the play: "It was certainly an extraordinary success. The pit got on its legs and cheered with all its might the moment I showed myself in front of the curtain".[14] Receipts were over £100 a night, and a royal party (The Prince and Princess of Wales, together and separately) came to see it several times. The triumphant run was finally brought to an end by a heatwave in August, after 136 performances. It was rapidly followed by an equally successful tour.

The action of the play *Man and Wife* (as opposed to the novel) takes place entirely in Scotland, in and around Windygates, the home of Sir Patrick Lundie (played by John Hare)[15]. Anne Silvester (played by Lydia Foote), governess of the Lundie family, has a meeting with Geoffrey Delamayn (Mr Coughlan), who had promised marriage and now tries to escape from his promise. The play is much more ambiguous about the need for their marriage, apart from her desire for it; in

---

[13] Ibid.
[14] Bancroft, Sir Squire and Lady Marie. *Recollections of Sixty Years*. London: John Murray, 1909, p. 169.
[15] This and subsecuqent quotes are taken from *Man and Wife*, by Wilkie Collins, privately printed, 1873.

the novel it is clear to the reader that Anne is pregnant. It is still subtly there, however, as there seems to be some sort of urgency in their Third Act meeting. It is hardly likely, however, that the Examiner of Plays would have accepted such a situation for the stage. Twenty years later, however, in the year of Collins's death, Henry Arthur Jones was able to openly state that the lead character was pregnant, in his play *The Middleman*. Anne threatens to kill herself, and so Delamayn consents to a private marriage. He suggests meeting at an inn close by, where, as it is known according to Scottish law, a simple statement before witnesses that a man and a woman are married suffices as a marriage.

Arnold Brinkworth (Mr George Herbert) appears and discusses with Sir Patrick Lundie his wish to marry Sir Patrick's niece, Blanche (Marie Wilton). A simple couple, they are delighted to be engaged, much to the amusement of the shrewd and caustic Sir Patrick. Geoffrey's groom Duncan appears with bad news, which Geoffrey takes to mean that the horse on which he had betted heavily on has lost; but he is relieved to find that it is only his father who is dangerously ill. He must go to London, and entreats Arnold, whose life he once saved, to go meet Anne at the inn and explain his necessary departure before fulfilling his engagement to her, and to give her a hastily scribbled note. Lady Lundie (Mrs Leigh Murray, who so excelled as Ruth in *Black & White*) enters with the news that Anne has disappeared, and requests that no one speak of her again, doubting the propriety of her disappearance.

The second act takes place at the inn at Craig Fernie. Anne, as a woman alone, is feeling slightly harassed by the suspicious landlady and the over-confidential waiter. Arnold appears, much to Anne's dismay, and she receives Geoffrey's note with even more dismay. It dawns on them that the last train is gone and a storm is approaching, halting Arnold's departure. They vaguely allude to being husband and wife to the ever more suspicious landlady in order to allay her doubts of the propriety of their being there together. News arrives that Lady Lundie is on her way there. Blanche enters the room, desperate to see her beloved governess. Arnold blows out the candles and escapes out the window unseen.

The Third Act takes place in Sir Patrick's library. Geoffrey has returned from town. In soliloquy he explains that his brother has hinted that his gambling debts could be taken care of if he consents to marry a wealthy widow. He then has an argument with his Doctor, Speedwell (Squire Bancroft, taking a relatively small role) about the detrimental effects of his physical training. Geoffrey next engages Sir Patrick in a conversation about Scottish marriage laws, and begins to realise that he can extricate himself from his promise to Anne, because by acknowledging themselves as man and wife before witnesses, Arnold and Anne have unwittingly committed themselves to marriage ("how easy it is to drift into marriage in Scotland"). Anne enters, hoping Geoffrey will fulfil his promise and again urges the speedy necessity. He rejoins, however, that "you are already married to Arnold Brinkworth". Anne is stunned and the curtain falls.

The Fourth Act takes place in the picture gallery of the mansion. Arnold, not knowing of the error he has committed with Anne, has married Blanche. Sir

Patrick, Arnold, Anne and Blanche are debating the issue of Anne's possible marriage to Arnold and Geoffrey's promise to marry her. Sir Patrick lays the case that either Arnold is married to Anne according to Scottish law because of events at the Inn, and therefore Blanche suffers (and Arnold is guilty of bigamy), or the incident can be contested, and Anne, as his wife, is left to suffer the cruel treatment of Geoffrey. The waiter from the Inn arrives with the letter from Geoffrey that Anne had dropped, and offers to sell it back to the owner for £5. Sir Patrick agrees, and sees from the letter that it promises marriage and effectively settles the case. However, he realises the terrible position she will be placed in, hated by her husband for interfering with his plans to marry the wealthy widow. He recommends that Anne destroy the document and that he will argue the case without it.

Geoffrey arrives with his solicitor, defiant, insisting that he made no promise of marriage. Anne, however, cannot bear to mar Blanche's happiness and produces the letter, which it is agreed by all (even Delamayn's solicitor) to be irrefutable as a contract of marriage, as it took place before Anne's and Arnold's utterances at the inn. Geoffrey loses his temper and furiously orders "his wife" to "come home". However, his athletic but overworked frame cannot take the strain, and he collapses with a stroke. Anne hurries to his side and the curtain falls, leaving "in doubt the question as to whether Anne Silvester is wife or widow".[16]

---

[16] *Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1873.

Thus the play is a simply constructed piece, with all the melodrama and supernatural taken out of it, as well as the murder mystery element. Some critics were pleased with the alteration; "In dramatising his own story, Mr Wilkie Collins has made some judicious modifications, which, without any degree lessening the force of the double moral his novel was written to convey, have the advantage of discreetly removing out of sight those portions of the narrative that deal with events too terrible for stage illustration".[17] Geoffrey in the play is a brute, but not as horrible as in the novel, and you would not imagine him contemplating murdering Anne as he does in the novel. But the most important character removed from the play, a character whose role adds considerably to the length of the novel, makes a further case for changing the divorce laws and underlines the need for the Married Women's Property Act, is the strange, mute cook, Hester Dethridge.

Hester Dethridge acts as a catalyst in the novel through the fact that she was once married to an abusive and alcoholic husband. She was unable to escape him, though she tried to leave and to set herself up on her own. Wherever she went, however, he always managed to track her down, and, as was his right, claim her money and property as his own. Being somewhat psychologically unstable in the first place, she is driven to desperate measures, and murders him, without ever being discovered. From that point on, she becomes mute. After it is proven that Anne and Geoffrey are married and he takes her home to his rented house in Fulham, Geoffrey discovers Hester's written confession of the murder and insists

---

[17] ibid.

that she tell him how she did it, so that he can murder Anne. At the point of the murder, however, he has a seizure, and Hester Dethridge, succumbing to the madness which seized her when she killed her husband, finishes him off.

One interesting thing about this strange character is the use of one of Collins's favourite themes, the second self. After she has killed her husband,

Hester begins to have visions of an apparition, which is herself:

> The Thing stole out, dark and shadowy in the pleasant sunlight. At first, I saw only the dim figure of a woman. After a little, it began to get plainer, brightening from within outwards — brightening, brightening, till it set before me the vision of MY OWN SELF – repeated as if I was standing before a glass: the double of myself, looking at me with my own eyes. I saw it move over the grass. I saw it stop behind the beautiful little boy. I saw it stand and listen, as I had stood and listened at the dawn of morning, for the chiming of the bell before the clock struck the hour. When it heard the stroke, it pointed down to the boy, with my own hand. And it said to me, with my own voice, "Kill him." … I saw nothing but the double of myself, with the pointing hand. I felt nothing but the longing to kill the boy.[18]

The apparition appears for the final time behind Geoffrey, and she is unable to resist the longing to kill him, as he lies helpless with a stroke.

Reviews for the play were on the whole positive, if not exactly glowing, especially in the *Daily Telegraph*, a reviewer (most likely at this time Clement Scott) who seems to have appreciated Collins's plays most warmly throughout his dramatic career:

> The name of Mr Wilkie Collins attached to any work is always a guarantee that the utmost amount of artistic finish will be found bestowed. ... "Man and Wife", brought out on Saturday night at the Prince of Wales's with a success not to be disputed, represents on the stage the prominent features

---

[18] Collins, Wilkie. *Man and Wife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 583.

> of that powerful novel which under the same title originally ran a prosperous career through the weekly numbers of a popular serial, and was afterwards published in three volumes greatly in demand at every library. … there can be no hesitation in declaring that in "Man and Wife" will be found a play of such remarkable completeness, both in story and in the acting, that on this ground alone a lengthy career may be confidently predicted.[19]

The *Standard*, however, found fault with it entirely, and, in an opposite reaction, declares, "Mr Collins has shown immense talent in his own peculiar way – that of pleasing innumerable readers with his novels – but he has not proved himself a dramatist".[20]

The *Times* and the *Standard* both seem to have preferred the book; the *Times* critic (John Oxenford at this time) stating, "One feels something like regret in finding fault with a work so carefully constructed, so admirably put on the stage, so conscientiously acted in every part, as the play *Man and Wife*, written, be it ever borne in mind, by one of our most thoughtful and ingenious novelists. Nevertheless, when the curtain descends we cannot help feeling that nearly everything which gave the book its especial value is absent from the drama". In the end he found it "a subject so powerful in its effect thus worked into a narrative so comparatively feeble when treated in a dramatic form". However, he feels that those who have not read the book would enjoy it more than those who had: "those who have not read the novel may derive enjoyment from the contemplation of a skilfully constructed, excellently written and equally acted, thought not strongly impressive, play".[21] The *Standard* misses the character of Sir Patrick: "in the

---

[19] *Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1873.
[20] *The Standard*, 24 March 1873.
[21] *The Times*, 24 March 1873.

book the character is well drawn, sprightly and amusing. In the play, making a slight reserve in favour of the first act, he is mysteriously dull, stiff and prosy".[22]

The *Daily News*, however, appreciated the changes made from the novel: "Not only is the plot of the novel shorn of its coarser features, and reduced to greater simplicity, but its dialogue ... is divested of all matter not strictly necessary to the progress of the story; while thus condensed and otherwise improved, it becomes impressed with an amount of vigour and of point for which, perhaps, few of Mr Collins's admirers were prepared". He sums up thus; "Man and Wife, in spite of a plot which sins, in more than one important particular, against the canons of dramatic writing, is a play which not only interests, but satisfies in a high degree the intellectual requirements of the audience. ... His success was honestly won".[23] Cook also appreciated the transition from novel to stage:

> Mr Collins ... has proved himself to be a dramatist of unusual ability. His play is no confused transfer to the stage of select scraps and scenes which the spectator has to connect and digest as best he may with such help as he can derive from his memory of the book, but a complete and coherent work, endowed with an independent vitality of its own. ... The story, though still retaining a certain repellent element ... is set forth with lucid art.[24]

He then points out how much the audience appreciated it: "It may be noted that it is admirably dramatic, conducted with much art, and that it moved the interest of the audience in no small degree". He sums up by saying, "Its real interest, however, and the skill with which it is constructed and represented, will probably

---

[22] *The Standard* 24 March 1873.
[23] *Daily News* 24 March 1873.
[24] Cook, pp. 250-51.

secure for it a popularity of some endurance".[25] All of the reviewers greatly praised the acting, especially Mr Dewar as Bishopriggs, the humorous Scottish waiter, a character which both reviewers and audience seemed to appreciate.

The simplicity of the play, however, leaves it with major faults, in the characterisation and the ending. In lifting the dialogue from the novel straight into play form, some characters, who were robust and fully drawn in the novel, become caricatures, most obviously Lady Lundie. In the novel she is a spiteful, vain and mean-spirited woman, who gets her comeuppance in the end when Sir Patrick marries Anne, making Lady Lundie the dowager. In the play, she disappears after the first act. The ending is too ambiguous, and the play seems to just peter out with the collapse of Geoffrey. But Collins himself had this to say to Harper and Brothers, who were publishing the serial version of the novel in the United States at the same time as he was writing the play (and he was evidently hoping that the play would be performed in America as well):

> As to the dramatic version (the greater part of which I have completed) I find (since I wrote to you) that the denouement of the book, cannot properly be followed in the play. After considering the question carefully, I feel that I must invent an entirely new conclusion for the drama. … It will be sufficient, I think, to announce that a dramatic version of the novel is being written by me for performance in the United States as well as in England – that the play will be in four acts; the three first acts closely following the book, and the fourth act containing a new conclusion to the story invented by the author, with a view to stage necessities and effects.[26]

Nevertheless, the play was extremely popular with audiences in London, because

---

[25] Ibid., pp. 252-254
[26] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 338.

it fitted in with the taste of the times. Catherine Peters also maintains that the play "undoubtedly influenced Pinero" especially in the creation of his play *The Second Mrs Tanqueray.*[27]

*Man and Wife* was revived in 1876, and ran concurrently with *Miss Gwilt.* It was also revived by the Bancrofts at the Haymarket in 1887. Collins, returning to the marriage and divorce theme, at some point in the late 1870s, drew up an idea for a comedy entitled "The Widowed Wives" or "The Divorced Women" - three married couples who divorce and then marry each other's spouses. This, however, never came to fruition, which is hardly surprising for the time; "perhaps three divorces in a single play were too many for theatrical managements to stomach".[28]

Collins's plays from here on were to be lighter than his novelistic work; they could still be considered "melodramatic" to modern readers in the pejorative sense, yet they are effective pieces in themselves and many could be performed today. From this point the sparseness of his dramatic writing influenced the writing of his novels, which are less broad in their conception, with fewer characters, and on the whole less "Dickensian" in the sense that *No Name* and *Armadale* were. During this last period of his life, the remaining seven novels are weak, with the possible exception of *The Evil Genius* in 1886. This could very

---

[27] Peters, p. 322.
[28] Ibid., p. 379.

well be because it was conceived and planned for stage presentation, unlike his other later novels.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *THE NEW MAGDALEN*

Wilkie Collins's adaptation of *A Court Duel*, performed at Miss Kelly's Theatre in 1850, was a benefit for 'The Female Emigration Fund', an organisation concerned with sending 'fallen women' to Australia for a new life, the kind of good works institution which would have aided women like Little Em'ly and Martha from *David Copperfield*. Just over twenty years later, Collins was to bring the fallen woman on to the stage with his production of *The New Magdalen*, adapted from his own novel. The play, which opened at the Olympic Theatre under the management of Ada Cavendish on 19th May 1873, with the manageress in the title role of Mercy Merrick, was a great hit. It ran for 19 weeks, toured the provinces equally successfully, and was revived in London in 1875 and again, after Collins's death, in 1895.

The novel originally began serialisation in Bentley's *Temple Bar*, and was published in book form in the Spring of 1873. The production of the play followed close on the heels of this publication in May 1873. Collins was learning to privately print his novels in their play form, if not find them a home on stage, almost simultaneously with book publication, as a strategy for deterring the pirates from presenting his novels on stage. In this instance he succeeded, as he had not with *The Woman in White*, although there was a later, unauthorised, production of *The New Magdalen* at the New Cross Theatre in April 1884.

The reader of the novel *The New Magdalen* is immediately struck by its dramatic form. It is divided into a Preamble, two 'Scenes' and an Epilogue, and the settings and persons of the action are described before the Preamble and the First Scene. In the play, the same divisions become a Prologue and Three Acts.

With this novel Collins was successful in transferring a novel structured like a play, to the stage. He had made the attempt earlier with *No Name* (serialised and published in 1862). *No Name* is divided into eight scenes, with the action being moved along between scenes through letters, articles, diaries, and other written words (and no dialogue). The novel seemed destined for the stage.

One theme running through *No Name* is that of the acting of parts. Magdalen Vanstone, the heroine, is a born actress, which first becomes apparent when she participates in an amateur theatrical production of *The Rivals*. Magdalen must call upon her acting skills when she discovers that she and her sister are illegitimate after her parents' tragic deaths and that they are therefore disinherited. She begins a quest to recover what she considers her property. When she meets with a distant relative, Captain Wragge, one way of making money is to go on the stage and present a series of performances based upon the illustrious Charles Mathews's 'At Homes' (these were one man shows in which Mathews portrayed an extraordinary variety of characters, performances of which Dickens and Collins were avid admirers). Later Magdalen personates her own governess, in order to gain admittance to the house of her cousin, Noel Vanstone (another distant cousin who has inherited what she considers 'her' money). Wragge himself is usually acting a part in the course of his con-man career, as we discover through his diaries; he acquires a variety of "skins to jump into". Magdalen plays along with this and "jumps into" one herself in her quest to trap Noel Vanstone into marriage, trying to fulfil her objective to regain her father's wealth.

One would expect such a rich source of material, with such a plum part for an actress, to be easily transferable to the stage. However, Collins had terrible trouble in turning *No Name* into a play. He found it strangely resistant, and after several attempts he gave it up. Eventually there was a production of *No Name* for the stage, in an adaptation by Wybert Reeve, undertaken at Collins's own request. The plot is considerably rearranged, the number of characters greatly reduced, and all the wonderful subtleties of the novel are lost. For example Norah, the sister, becomes an invalid, very much in the background throughout the entire story. Unfortunately, even this adaptation, performed on the New York stage, was not a success, and the novel never became the play Collins wanted it to be.

*The New Magdalen*, like the novel published immediately before it, *Poor Miss Finch*, has fewer characters and settings than the more expansive novels of the 1860's, including *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*. Catherine Peters in her biography rather bemoans this "literary economy", stating that "Collins's practised ingenuity in handling a complicated story and his impersonations of different points of view, his great strengths, were jettisoned".[1] She finds the novel stagy rather than dramatic. But it is a fact that all of the later novels are much more economical than the novels of the 1860's, the only ones considered as "great" (or even discussed at length) by the majority of critics.

George Watt, in discussing *The New Magdalen* in his book, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century Novel*, decries the fact that "critics deal with the later works all too briefly ... the works are almost impossible to consider

---

[1] Peters, p. 337.

collectively".[2] This is generally because of Collins's supposed decline. Talk of a decline, however, is insulting, and in the light of recent critical discussion patently untrue; he was as prolific and hardworking between 1870 and his death, perhaps even more so, and as conscientious towards his writing as ever before. Nor can all of the later novels be dismissed as so much 'pulp fiction', although some are certainly stronger than others. Collins did change his style by writing novels with less expansive plots, concentrating instead on stories with limited characters, strongly drawn, in trying and interesting situations. His later books hark back to his earliest novels, certainly well-received by the critics, which were also concerned with a limited number of characters and settings. Though it is true that *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are easily Collins's best novels, it is fatuous to dismiss all of his later works as the products of an increasingly disordered and declining mind.

By the time he began writing *The New Magdalen*, Collins was already deeply involved with professional theatre production, as is evidenced by his successful productions of *The Woman in White* at the Olympic Theatre and *Man & Wife* at the Prince of Wales, and by his growing intimacy with members of the theatrical profession. *The New Magdalen*, after all, was his ninth professionally produced play. Perhaps he thought he had hit upon a winning formula - conceiving and writing a novel, for serialisation or for going straight into book publication, which could ultimately, if not immediately, be adapted for the stage. He did so with *The New Magdalen*; if the novel was written with dramatisation in

---

[2] Watt, George. *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century Novel.* London: Croom Helm, 1984, p. 98.

mind, it is because by this time he knew the theatrical conventions of producing a play, and the financial considerations involved.

It is interesting to note that this is the first play presented on the English stage in Victorian times to include a clergyman as one of the principal characters (not to mention a clergyman who marries a reformed prostitute). Henry Arthur Jones was to follow in the 1884 with *Saints and Sinners*. It is also interesting to note that. although the play had an extremely successful run in London, and an equally successful tour in the provinces, when the play was taken abroad on tour, the Italians would not permit clergy of any kind on the stage and Julian Gray's profession had to be changed to that of "austere magistrate", as Collins termed it in a letter to Frank Archer. It was, apparently, a "great success at Rome, Florence and Milan".[3] The play was such a popular vehicle for actresses, that it was revived in London and the provinces – George Bernard Shaw saw, and admired, Janet Achurch when she played the role of Mercy Merrick in 1895, and later put a clergyman into one of his plays, *Candida*. Matthew Arnold was among those who greatly admired *The New Magdalen* as a play.

Shaw, writing in the compilation of his criticisms, *Our Theatre in the 90's*, had quite a lot to say about the play, and about suburban theatres in general. A Mr Mulholland, the manager of the Metropole in Camberwell, stated in a circular,

> It is a curious fact in connection with the recent craze for problem and sex plays that the bold initiation of Wilkie Collins in this respect has been practically ignored. The existence alike of such a work as *The New Magdalen*, and the creation of Mercy Merrick in this relation, has never been acknowledged. It is in some sense with a view to showing the influence of this work on the so-called 'new movement' in dramatic

---

[3] Archer, p. 185.

> literature, and placing dramatic facts in their true perspective, that the present revival has been undertaken. [4]

Shaw makes a further interesting point in stating that the play was a "well-made piece ... it is still a strong play as plays go ... but presenting the fatal disqualification from the point of view of the West End manager of today that it requires acting, and powerful acting too".[5]

Mercy Merrick is one in a catalogue of strong women in the novels of Wilkie Collins. We have Marian Halcombe from *The Woman in White* with her graceful figure and "mannish" features; the indomitable Magdalen Vanstone (his first "Magdalen", although she would prostitute herself in marriage, and not on the streets); Rachel Verinder, strong although headstrong, from *The Moonstone*; Rosamund, who must be the eyes for her blind husband at a cost to her own peace of mind in discovering the truth, in *The Dead Secret*; Valeria Macallan, who must clear her husband's name, without any support from him or his family, in *The Law and the Lady*; one could even include Catherine Linley, who braves the stigma of divorce for the sake of her daughter, from *The Evil Genius*; Anne Silvester from *Man and Wife*; and perhaps Emily Brown from *I Say No*, who, alone in the world, must discover the terrible secret of her father's death.

Collins portrayed strong women in the majority of his novels, which is, in a way, what makes them so fascinating, both then and now; there are, of course, the villainesses, including Lydia Gwilt from *Armadale*, Madame Fontaine (much more interesting than her "sweet-tempered daughter" Minna) from *Jezebel's*

---

[4] Shaw, *Our Theatre in the 90's*, p. 231.
[5] Ibid., p. 232.

*Daughter*, and Countess Narona from *The Haunted Hotel.* When the women in the novel are not strong, like Carmina in *Heart and Science*, Lucilla in *Poor Miss Finch* (she is headstrong without being strong) or Iris in *Blind Love*, the novels are markedly weaker. Even Collins himself derides the penchant for the pretty, weak heroine: "no backbone in her, no dash; a kind feeble, goody-goody, sugarish disposition". (p. 65)[6] And one must feel that Laura Fairlie, in *The Woman in White*, is considerably less interesting than her wonderful half-sister, Marian.

*The New Magdalen* deals with the fallen woman and her struggle to find a place in society, one of Collins's three novels from the 1870's to treat this issue. Watt discusses the two kinds of women in Victorian Society, the virtuous and the fallen, and how the issue was dealt with by several major Victorian novelists; "Dickens, Eliot, Gaskell, Collins, Gissing, Moore and Hardy each have, in at least one major work, questioned the absolute nature of the two groups of women – the pure and the fallen. They proved there was no one fall, no single disgrace, no automatic placing in categories of purity or prostitution." [7] Collins deals with this issue to a certain extent in *Man & Wife* (Anne's pregnancy), and to an even greater extent in *The Fallen Leaves: The First Series*.

The "fallen woman" novel was a popular vehicle for serious writers because it served a useful purpose, having a moral issue built in to the situation of the central character. Watt suggests that the popularity of the theme came about because these novelists were reacting against the patriarchal nature of Victorian Society: "Through the study of the sexual fall these novelists are able to highlight

---

[6] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Fallen Leaves*,. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1994.

the intense and complex problems of Victorian women from all classes, expose the sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and give themselves the role of social reformer in the process".[8] But while other novelists, however gently, condemned their heroines for their "disgrace", Collins stands out as one who never did so. In comparing, briefly, *The New Magdalen* with Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*, Watt discusses the "overwhelming sense of guilt ... shared by her creator ... he [Collins] does not share Mrs Gaskell's discomfiture when vindicating his heroines". [9]

This sympathy may have something to do with his own life, and the two most important women in it - "fallen women" by the standards of the age. Both women must have felt that the weight of Victorian was morality against them. Caroline Graves, by all accounts a brilliant hostess, could not entertain any of Collins's respectable, and/or married female friends (Nina Lehmann, for example) at their supper parties (unless of course these women were in a similar condition to herself, like Laura Seymour, mistress to Collins's great friend of later years, Charles Reade). Martha Rudd, too, must have felt a bit lonely at times; although Collins was always extremely careful to keep up appearances for her sake, appearing as "Mr Dawson, barrister" at home with Martha in the role of "Mrs Dawson", nevertheless when he was not with her, there could have been few women who would call upon her.

*The Fallen Leaves*, Collins's novel written in 1879, presents an interesting comparison with *The New Magdalen*. The theme is similar, but the characters are

---

[7] Watt, p. 7.
[8] Ibid., p. 7.
[9] Ibid. p. 98.

more simply, even more crudely, drawn. Amelius Goldenheart (obvious names are often a sign of weak writing), brought up in a Primitive Christian Socialist Community in the wilds of Illinois, has come to London to see life (with the approval of the elders of his community). He is a novice in a cultured world, an innocent abroad, possessed of strong principles and simple Christianity. In the course of solving a mystery, he meets with a prostitute known as 'Simple Sally', one of the 'fallen leaves' of society. After many trials and tribulations, and though he has been deeply in love with another (respectable) woman, he marries Sally at the very end of the novel — whether out of pity, or through love, is not clear. Unfortunately, we are never given a glimpse into the married life of simple Amelius Goldenheart and his simple wife (sometimes it is difficult to tell which is the more simple). Collins fully intended to write *The Fallen Leaves - the Second Series*; but unfortunately the book was not well received by either the critics (as he expected) or the public (which he did not expect), and the second series was therefore never written.

In comparison with *The Fallen Leaves*, the earlier *The New Magdalen* is a much stronger novel. The central characters are the key to this contrast. In Julian Gray, we have a high-minded individual, who is a real and likeable person, someone who can appear quite normal away from his pulpit, his preaching to the fallen, and his occasional cries of "Arise, poor wounded heart". Mercy is herself amazed at the two sides to his character. Having known him only in her sorest trials, as a larger-than-life figure of Christian mercy and compassion, she is amazed by "his easy manners and his light way of talking ... a man who

thoroughly understood and enjoyed good wine ... utterly unlike the picture which her fancy had drawn of him in everyday life" (p. 67).[10] Julian is a famous preacher who can move his congregation, and who earnestly wishes to be "the Archdeacon of the afflicted, the Dean of the hungry, the Bishop of the poor". He also, in Mercy's own experience, was "the preacher whose words had charmed, purified, ennobled her ... whose sermon had drawn tears from women about her whom she knew to be shameless and hardened in crime" (p. 69). And yet, he is a man, and human enough to enjoy life, and to fall in love with Mercy; Collins creates a wonderful scene between Julian and his aunt, Lady Janet, (another sympathetic, well-drawn character) in which she discovers the secret of his love, and in which he behaves as any passionate, red-blooded male would do. Shaw, in the essay quoted above, states, "Where Wilkie Collins really struck the new movement was in his sketch of the Reverend Julian Grey ... You will find hundreds of such parsons now."[11]

Amelius Goldenheart, on the other hand, is a transparent character, and, although he is drawn by the same careful hand, Collins could not breathe life into a caricature. Amelius enters the novel expounding the doctrines of his Christian community in Illinois, in language which sounds contrived and unnatural, coming from the mouth of a genial and attractive young man: "the Christian religion, as Christ taught it, has long ceased to be the religion of the Christian world. A selfish and cruel Pretence is set up in its place." (p. 23) The convoluted plot

---

[10] This and subsequent quotes are taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The New Magdalen.* Stroud, Gloucester: Allan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1993.
[11] Shaw, p. 232.

becomes disjointed, and the "Fallen Leaves" theme heavy-handed. The mystery becomes a tragedy, a melodrama of the worst sort, which hastens to the end of the novel and the unromantic marriage. It is domestic melodrama from start to finish, and probably one of the worst examples of Collins's melodramatic tendencies, usually kept in check by his vivid characterisation and careful plotting.

The women in *The Fallen Leaves* suffer from the same simplistic characterisation as the central male character, Amelius. We first meet Simple Sally when Amelius is walking the streets in an effort to calm his disordered mind. She approaches him in her role as prostitute, but such a character seems too unreal:

> The lost character had, to all appearance, barely passed the boundary between childhood and girlhood ... Her eyes, of the purest and loveliest blue, rested on Amelius with a vacantly patient look, like the eyes of a suffering child. ... But for the words in which she had accosted him, it would have been impossible to associate her with the lamentable life that she led. The appearance of the girl was artlessly virginal and innocent; she looked as if she had passed through the contamination of the streets without being touched by it ... Robed in pure white, with her gentle blue eyes raised to heaven, a painter might have shown her on his canvas as a saint or an angel. (p. 143)

From the moment he meets with her, and takes her back to his lodgings in order to free her from her life of degradation and prostitution, Sally obeys Amelius's every command. She has no character, no spark of life except what his presence gives her. In consequence, she is not a character who can readily command the sympathies of the reader.

Regina Farnaby, the woman with whom Amelius falls in love, is also a character who cannot rouse much interest in the reader; she is, in fact, the type

which Collins himself described in the words quoted above regarding the "sugary disposition". She is beautiful, but a woman of "little passion" and with a weak will. This leaves the reader with very few characters to take to their hearts, except perhaps the minor figures of the outspoken American, Rufus Dingwell; the tragic Mrs Farnaby, probably the most interesting character in the novel; old Mrs Sowler, very much a Dickensian, "Sairey Gamp" character; Phoebe, the put-upon maid; or Toff, Amelius's French manservant.

Mercy Merrick, the central character of *The New Magdalen*, is, by contrast, a well drawn, warmly human "fallen woman", and one of Collins's finest female creations. She is given a credible history, and a chance to recount it authentically, as a necessary element of the plot. She is surrounded by strong characters who complement her own role, and the underlying theme of the injustice of society towards the fallen woman is able to show itself through the plot, without forcing it upon the reader in the form of moral platitudes. Mercy is complex and multi-dimensional, and above all, human. It might perhaps have been better if Collins had left the subject of fallen woman alone after creating Mercy Merrick, close as the subject was to his own heart, and after giving the subject generous and sympathetic treatment in *The New Magdalen*. Certainly the critics, and the reading public, seemed to think so.

Comparisons between this novel and this play point up, perhaps more strongly than in any other case, Collins's cleverness in adapting his own novels for the stage. Certainly the novel lent itself more easily than any other creation to stage adaptation, as the words spoken in the play are taken directly from the novel,

but Collins did not have the same drawbacks as he did with *Man and Wife*. It is, once again, in the ruthless cutting of text that Collins excels when creating a finely crafted piece of theatre. In this case, however, as opposed, for example, to that of *The Woman in White*, the plot remains the same. Everything that is in the least unnecessary is cut from the text, leaving a streamlined play with a simple yet compelling plot, carried forward by several strongly drawn characters. In cutting out unnecessary text, however, Collins did not need to cut a single character - the novel was created compactly enough to transfer the same number of characters to the stage. The plot is considered "surprisingly simple" by many critics, yet it is this characteristic that enables the novel to be so easily and aptly transferred to the stage.

The main difference between the novel and the play lies in the novel's comparatively greater bitterness in attitude towards society's responsibility for the fallen woman. Collins sets up, immediately, the juxtaposition between the two women in Victorian society: "the pure one to be married, the other to be used".[12] He introduces Mercy and Grace in the Preamble of the novel, and the Prologue of the play. In this way, "the comparison of the truly penitent fallen woman and the conventionally virtuous woman becomes the central concern of the novel ... Collins manipulates the reader's reaction to the whole moral question". [13]

The novel begins on the French frontier, during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Mercy, a nurse attached to the French ambulance, enters the room, "tall, lithe, and graceful ... Pale and sad ... there was an innate nobility in the carriage of

---

[12] Watt, p. 107.
[13] Ibid., p. 107.

this woman's head ... which made her irresistibly striking and beautiful" (p. 6). Grace (a traveller who has been stopped by the Germans and robbed of her possessions, before being rescued by the French) follows, “smaller in stature”, and described thus: “The common consent of mankind would have declared her to be an unusually pretty woman” (p. 6). Already the two women are set apart, with Mercy appearing in a better light.

After Grace tells her brief history, she tries to cajole Mercy into telling hers. Mercy reluctantly agrees to do so, only after insisting Grace do not sit too near her until she has heard the truth. True to form, Grace is horrified to find she is alone with a woman with a past such as Mercy’s. Immediately she becomes cold and keeps her distance, although she is still morbidly curious to hear the full story. Mercy questions the circumstances which led to her downfall; “I sometimes wonder if Society had no duties towards me when I was a child selling matches in the street - when I was a hard-working girl, fainting at my needle for want of food” (p. 12), and confirms Society's position towards her, which becomes the undercurrent of the novel/play: “For three years past all that a sincerely penitent woman can do I have done. It doesn't matter. Once let my past story be known, and the shadow of it covers me ... the lost place is not to be regained. I can't get back!” (p. 12). Grace, for her part, although she insisted on hearing the story can only reply with trivial and commonplace phrases, and Mercy feels that “the utter absence of any fellow-feeling with her on Grace's side expressed itself unconsciously in the plainest terms” (p. 15).

At this point Grace is apparently killed by a falling shell, and Mercy is faced with the temptation of assuming Grace's identity, thereby securing a place in a Lady's household as companion. Before she makes her choice, we once more see her as the "angel of mercy" – she cheers and comforts the wounded soldiers who remained behind after the French retreat, and Collins tells us, "If the firing had been resumed at that moment - if a shell had struck her dead in the act of succouring the afflicted - what Christian judgement would have hesitated to declare that there was a place for this woman in heaven?" (p. 25).

Mercy, however, is finally driven to the temptation, not through her own choice, but by a chance meeting with a German surgeon. Though humble and sincerely penitent for her past, Mercy is also a woman of passion, and of pride, and she is stung into carrying through the lie against the judgement of her better self; "the fatal severity of the German discipline had snapped asunder the last tie that bound her to her better self" (p. 32), and when asked for her name, she gives it as Grace Roseberry. It is her one failing; "her quick temper instantly resented the discourtesy of which she had been made the object" (p. 36) by the German; "she answered him recklessly, defiantly, without fairly realising what she was doing, until it was done. ... The words were hardly out of her mouth before she would have given everything she possessed in the world to recall them" (p. 36). Through an all-too-common human failing, pride, the plot moves forward inevitably. The cliff-hanger which ends the prologue is that, after Mercy leaves in her new persona, the same German doctor succeeds in bringing Grace back to life, ignorant that the women have traded clothes and identities.

We next meet Mercy, now installed as Grace and as companion to Lady Janet. Lady Janet has taken to Mercy for herself, and not for her "father's" sake; she says, "My dear child, do you remember what I said when you first came here? You offered me your poor father's letter of introduction. I took one look at you and put the letter aside unopened. Your face is your introduction (those were my words); your father can say nothing for you which you have not already said for yourself"[14]. Surely it seems as though Mercy has made it; she has succeeded in winning her employer's love for herself, and not for what she represents herself to be. In soliloquy, Mercy wonders, "Could the true Grace Roseberry have earned sweeter praise than that, if the true Grace Roseberry had lived to enter this house? Oh, if I could but confess what I have done! if my good conduct would only plead my excuse! how I should enjoy this innocent life - what a grateful, happy woman I could be!" Because Mercy is not an inherently evil woman, her conscience provokes her, and provides the major plot conflict. Collins spells it out in the novel, though he has no need to in the play; "What is the matter with her? The matter with her is secret remorse. This delicate and beautiful creature pines under the slow torment of constant self-reproach" (p. 45).

Her love for Lady Janet, however, and the fact she has lied to her, is not the biggest problem Mercy faces. She has fallen in love, and is loved by, Lady Janet's nephew, Horace Holmcroft, who comes from a very good family. Deceiving him, and not telling him the truth before they are married, would have far greater consequences - to let him marry a "fallen woman" like her would be

---

[14] This and subsequent quotes are taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The New Magdalen: A Drama in Three Acts*, privately printed, 1873.

unforgivable in Society's terms. And of course, if she did marry him, he would be chained to her for life, as divorce still represented an awful stigma. In soliloquy, she makes an interesting point: "Can I be vile enough to let him drift blindfold into marriage with a woman like me? ... Am I worse than another woman? Another woman might have married him for his money". Of course Society's answer would be a resounding yes, as marrying for money was common practice.

At this point we meet the famous Julian Grey. Mercy is distraught because she believes he can see into her innermost heart, and see the truth. Julian surprises her by his easy-going manner and light-hearted way of talking, but she soon sees the earnest side of him when he begins to speak of the rural poor. Her fears are somewhat calmed, until she sees him start when Lady Janet introduces her by name. Shortly after, the true Grace appears on the scene, and eventually realises the cold reception accorded her is due to the fact that Mercy had stolen her letters, and is installed in her position in the house. She angrily demands a confrontation, and when Mercy walks in the door and sees her, she faints on the spot.

Act II delves deeper and deeper into Mercy's suffering conscience. Now she is not only faced with having to live a lie in front of those she loves, but she is doing an injury to a living woman. While she believed Grace to be dead, she could be doing her no harm, but she realises Grace is friendless and alone, and Mercy is responsible. She is eaten by remorse but cannot see her way out of her situation, and shrinks not only from the disgrace, but from hurting those she loves; "They are so good to me, how can I confess? How can I tell them I cheated them

out of their love?" In an emotional scene, Mercy plucks up the courage to tell Julian Grey the truth, knowing he alone would not judge her harshly.

At last, after her confession to Julian (which Grace has overheard), Grace and Mercy meet face to face. At first, Mercy is willing to do anything she can to atone for wronging her. Grace, however, shows the inherent meanness in her character from her first words; "I forbid you to be seated in my presence". Mercy tries to be humble, "anything rather than disappoint Julian Grey", but Grace does not desist in her viciousness. At last Mercy's womanly pride is goaded into action against her when Grace accuses her of trying to seduce Julian Grey. In the climax of the play, and the actress's finest moment, she calls Grace by the name of "Mercy Merrick". Collins even stresses the importance of the moment by including a footnote in the play text: "The actress should note by a pause, Mercy's audacity in calling Grace, to her face, by Mercy's own name. Thus: - 'Sit down and rest yourself' (a pause; then with marked emphasis) – 'Mercy Merrick!'" When the rest of the cast is assembled on stage, we have one more striking moment as first Mercy, then Lady Janet, then Horace all say to Grace, "You are mad". The second act ends on as striking a note as the first; when Mercy realises that a policeman has been called in to take Grace to an asylum, she interferes, saying "Touch her if you dare!".

The third act moves swiftly towards the revelation by Mercy of her true identity. Here, Horace has his best, and most moving scene, but he is also revealed as a shallow man. Horace has become jealous of what he sees as the growing intimacy between Julian and Mercy, and comes to confront them before

the time she has appointed to reveal the truth. Slowly Mercy's eyes are opened to the differences in character of the two men; "oh, what a contrast between them! What poor malice, what petty insolence on one side! What manly calmness, what true dignity on the other!" She completes her expiation of her sin by revealing the truth in a telegram from the matron of the woman's Refuge to which she intends to return, addressed to "Grace Roseberry". Horace sits in terror as Mercy says to him, "I have come from a Refuge; and I am going back to a Refuge. Mr Horace Holmcroft, I am Mercy Merrick." (p. 229). Julian is forced to watch in silence and admiration; "She little thinks what she condemns me to suffer. I never loved her as I love her now!" Horace, however, cannot forgive her.

Lady Janet and Grace return at this point, as it is the appointed time Mercy has stipulated for her confession. Grace is bitter to the end, and revels maliciously in her triumph. Lady Janet cannot abide the meanness of her character, and turns on her; "I would rather be deceived, as I have been deceived — I would rather suffer as I suffer now — than possess your unforgiving nature." As Mercy prepares to leave, Lady Janet shows that she, too, has a noble nature; "My child! I gave you a mother's love. What is there a mother's love cannot forgive!"

In the novel, there is a very bitter scene between Grace and Lady Janet which is cut entirely from the play, before the moment of revelation. Lady Janet sends for Grace, in order to offer her money as recompense, without having to admit that her beloved Mercy has deceived her. Here, Collins shows great skilfulness in illuminating both these women's characters. Grace expresses "insolent triumph", while Lady Janet is cold, imperious and hard. Grace is even

described as having an "evil smile", and "vindictive longings" (pp. 205-206). After trying to get Lady Janet to admit that her "adopted daughter" is an adventuress, Grace is forced to realise that "thanks to her own coarse cruelties of language and conduct ... the sense of her isolation and helplessness was almost maddening at that final moment" (p. 206). Collins puts the final touch on her character: "A woman of finer sensibilities would have left the room" (p. 207). Lady Janet's motives are made clear; "Her love for Mercy and her loathing for Grace, her horror of seeing her darling degraded and her affection profaned by a public exposure, had hurried her - there was no disputing it - into treating an injured woman harshly" (p. 207). Lady Janet at last makes an offer of money, and Grace's character is completely revealed; "There was something horrible in the greedy eagerness of her eyes as they watched Lady Janet" write the cheque; when she accepts the cheque, "the native meanness of her nature instantly asserted itself ... The audacity with which she had entered the room had been marked enough; it shrank to nothing before the infinitely superior proportions of the insolence with which she left it" (pp. 209-210).

The beauty of Lady Janet's character is followed up in the next scene of the book, never revealed so before, although we are denied this in the play; Lady Janet is deeply human in both her pride and her love. She speaks to herself of Mercy:

> Whatever she has done, the wretch deserves it! Not a living creature in this house shall say she has deceived me. She has *not* deceived me - she loves me! What do I care whether she has given me her true name or not? She has given me her true heart. What right had Julian to play upon her feelings and pry into her secrets? My poor, tempted, tortured child! I won't hear her confession. Not another word shall she say to any living creature. I am mistress - I will forbid it at once! (p. 211)

Unfortunately by cutting this scene, presumably in the interests of time, we lose some of the warmth of Lady Janet. This is the Lady Janet whom Catherine Peters declares is "unbelievable to the reader, plausible on stage". [15] A proud woman, a woman of position, wealth and breeding, she is used to having her own way, but is made human by her deep and enduring love for Mercy even in spite of what she knows Mercy has done. She is a sympathetic older woman, a character which Collins was to recreate in *My Lady's Money*, in the character of Lady Lydiard.

The very last scene in the play leaves us with Mercy and Julian, who is free to declare his love for her now that she is released from her engagement to Horace, and has made her great sacrifice out of Christian duty. They are left alone, and for the third time Julian is given the lines, "Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, the angels in heaven rejoice over you!" In the minimum of words between the two, Julian declares his love and asks her to be his wife. She, out of respect for his position and fear of reprisals if he were to marry her, tries to resist, and is won over by the force of his love for her, and her growing recognition of her love for him. The curtain comes down on them in each other's arms. Though different from the novel, it is the kind of sweet ending Collins could create (he was to do it later in *The Moonstone*), and calculated to appeal strongly to a Victorian theatre audience.

The end of the novel, however, tells quite a different story. After Mercy's confession to Horace of her identity, she tells the full story of her history. From this it emerges that, fainting from hunger in the streets, she was taken to a brothel and raped. In a long soliloquy, Collins puts into Mercy's words the thrust of his

---

[15] Peters, p. 338.

argument, his condemnation of Society for allowing women to drift into a life of sin:

> You ... have no idea of the outer world of ignorance in which your lost fellow-creatures live. ... The purpose of public charities, and the way to discover and apply to them, ought to be posted on every corner of the street. ... Every now and then the case of some forlorn creature (generally of a woman), who has committed suicide, within five minutes' walk perhaps of an institution which would have opened its doors to help her, appears in the newspapers, shocks you dreadfully, and is then forgotten again. Take as much pains to make charities and asylums known among the people *without* money, as are taken to make a new play, a new journal, or a new medicine among the people *with* money, and you will save many a lost creature who is perishing now. (p. 245)

George Watt feels that the novel "articulates Collins's appeal for pure Christian concern [which does not work in *The Fallen Leaves*] and that his control of the plot speaks more powerfully for reform than do overt comments he makes through Gray's character",[16] and also through the character of Mercy.

After her confession to all members of the household, including Lady Janet (who in this scene in the book does *not* initially forgive her - blaming her, not for the fraud, but for having revealed herself when Lady Janet asked her not to), Julian declares his love. In the words which were to end the play, Mercy does not succumb to Julian. He, a man above all, bursts into tears. Mercy is taken back to the Refuge by the understanding matron, to fulfil a new duty - to look after the outcast children of the London streets, of which she was once such a child. The Matron has brought with her a child of the streets whom Mercy had met once before, and been deeply touched by (seeing herself) when out walking with

---

[16] Watts, p. 18.

Horace. The child is described lovingly, but truthfully, in Collins's words:

> There was no beauty in *this* child; no halo of romance brightened the commonplace horror of her story. She came cringing into the room, staring stupidly at the magnificence all around her - the daughter of the London streets! The pet creation of the laws of political economy! the savage and terrible product of a worn-out system of government and of a civilisation rotten to its core! ... Mercy's sister in adversity crept fearfully over the beautiful carpet ... - a blot of mud on the splendour of the room. (p. 267)

Mercy and her sister in adversity leave the house, and Julian is left alone.

The novel continues, long after the play has finished, in an epilogue, conducted mostly through letters between Grace Roseberry, now returned to Canada, and Horace Holmcroft. These letters are bitter in the extreme, pointing up more than ever before their false and shallow characters, while they move the story along. They take a malicious delight in discussing and relating "disgusting particulars" of the story with each other, which harks back to Grace's morbid curiosity to hear Mercy's story in the prologue. The letters almost express a delight in titillating each other with malicious gossip. Grace even goes so far as to say, after declaring that she cannot wait for his next letter, "Do not suppose that I feel the smallest curiosity about this degraded and designing woman. My interest in her is purely religious. ... When I feel Satan near me - it will be *such* a means of grace to think of Mercy Merrick!" (p. 277). The reader is shocked by the vituperative quality of the letters.

Collins's final bitter condemnation of Society comes after it has been revealed that Mercy has at last agreed to marry Julian. Lady Janet, having long forgiven her, throws a ball in the couple's honour. Society cannot completely

ignore a titled person like Lady Janet - the ball is attended, but all the matrons of London Society have left their unmarried daughters at home. The implication is dreadfully clear, to the disgust of both Julian and Lady Janet, and the mortification of Mercy. Collins's own bitterness - perhaps with a thought for his own situation? - shows plainly through. Julian writes in his diary,

> I really had no adequate idea of the coarseness and rudeness which have filtered their way through society in these later times until I saw the reception accorded to my wife. The days of prudery and prejudice are gone by. Excessive amiability and excessive liberality are the two favourite assumptions of the modern generation. To see the women expressing their liberal forgetfulness of my wife's misfortunes ... and to see that not one in thirty of these very people had brought their unmarried daughters to the ball was ... to see civilised human nature in its basest conceivable aspect. (pp. 289-290).

Thus, the novel ends with the couple sailing off to America, to a new world and a new life, content with each other but stung by the bitterness and prejudice of society. How differently it ends from the play, when Julian takes Mercy in his arms and declares, "What can the world give me in exchange for you?" These last words of the play, however, as Collins knew they would, brought the house down.

Reviews of the play were consistently enthusiastic, if not about the moral content, then at least about the power of the drama. The *Telegraph* states, “Mr Wilkie Collins has give us a very powerful play … once more he has proved himself a most capable dramatist. … So thoroughly dramatic was it, so vigorous, and so well planned, the situations we so good, and, what is far better, the situations were worked up to in such a masterly manner”. The review ends, “The ‘New Magdalen’ is well worth seeing, and for our part we are rejoiced that an

author of so much talent and dramatic ability is encouraged to continue writing for the stage".[17] The *Times* reviewer agrees: "The *New Magdalen* … has been brought out at the Olympic Theatre with great and deserved success. … No drama … could be more complete in itself that the *New Magdalen*".[18]

[17] *Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 1873.
[18] The *Times*, 21 May 1873.

# CHAPTER NINE

## *MISS GWILT*

For his next theatrical production, Collins turned to a book written nearly ten years earlier. Though he had planned to dramatise it and had even published a dramatic adaptation shortly after the book publication in 1866, it took nearly a decade to put *Armadale* on the stage. Ada Cavendish was again involved, playing the title role in his adaptation, *Miss Gwilt*. After a trial run in 1875 in Liverpool, it was another London triumph.

*Armadale* the novel was serialised in the monthly magazine, *The Cornhill*, from November 1864 to June 1866. It was published in book form in April 1866. This novel is far and away his most "sensational", both in terms of plot, and in relation to the definition of sensation fiction. One of the aspects of sensation fiction was to use the new technology – in this case the penny post, the telegraph, and the new omnibus system in the metropolis (although he had already used the omnibus in *Basil*; it is where Basil met Margaret Sherwin). The pinnacle of the new technology has to be the poisoning plan at the end of the novel, which incorporates what is basically an air conditioning system.

*Armadale* is probably one of Collins's most pictorially descriptive novels, and the pictorial description ties in closely with the emotional occurrences. *Armadale* is again a "large cast" novel with a complicated plot involving a series of mysteries. We are given the essence of the mystery, or problem, at the outset, however, and are not called upon to guess any secrets as in *The Woman in White*, or even more strongly as in *The Moonstone*. *Armadale* is much more of a psychological novel concerned with themes such as second selves, Fate versus Free Will, and the power of dreams.

The thrust of the plot involves two generations of men named Allan Armadale. In the first generation, one Allan Armadale murdered the other one. On his deathbed he writes a letter to his son confessing without repentance his crime and warning him to keep away, if he should ever meet the son of the murdered man, lest the sins of the father be visited on the son. The son of the murderer, who has taken the alias Ozias Midwinter, receives this letter only after he has chanced to meet Allan Armadale and they have become close friends. He spends the bulk of the novel wondering if chance or Fate brought them together, and which of these governs their actions. Everything that occurs seems as if it could be pure coincidence, but Midwinter, and the reader, are never sure whether events are a result of fate or chance. *Armadale* is one of his most powerful novels psychologically, yet it does show some weakness in leaving events to "fate". The reader is left to question at the end what part fate really did have to play in shaping the events of the story and the lives of the characters.

The most important thing to happen early in the story is that, while doing a little moonlight sailing, Midwinter and Armadale happen upon a wrecked ship, the same ship on which Midwinter's father murdered Armadale's father. From that point on Midwinter is plagued by doubt, and sometimes crippled by it, as to his best course of action. On the ship, Allan has a dream in which he sees three visions. Midwinter believes this is a prophecy, and is always watching to see if the visions actually occur. When they do, he is overcome with fear and doubt as to the future, and his fear of his father's prophecy of the pattern repeating in his generation coming true.

The theme of twins, doubles, and second selves was something of an obsession throughout Collins's life, as discussed earlier. It is not surprising, then, that his opium addiction would manifest itself as wrestling with his other self, later in life. Collins suffered from erratic health most of his adult life, which was only exacerbated by the punishing writing schedule he set himself. Fairly early on he discovered, in conjunction with his doctor, that laudanum could assuage most of his problems, which included neuralgia and gout. His addiction to laudanum was not as an opium eater, but rather to treat his medical conditions. This addiction steadily grew until it was said that he could drink enough in one dose to kill another man. He places his praise of laudanum in Lydia's mouth:

> Who was the man who invented laudanum? I thank him from the bottom of my heart, whoever he was. If all the miserable wretches in pain of body and mind, whose comforter he has been, could meet together to sing his praises, what a chorus it would be! 'Drops', you are a darling! If I love nothing else, I love *you*. (pp. 426-427) [1]

The double selves used in *Armadale* – the two Allan Armadales – are physically opposite to each other. In fact, Midwinter is half caste. The theme that presents itself is dark vs. fair, but Collins again turns the tables on this sterotype and Midwinter, the dark Armadale, is as good as the fair one. In the Fate vs. Free Will debate, Collins is very careful not to present a strong authorial voice (unlike some other Victorian novelists), never stating his belief on either side of the debate. The readers are left to decide for themselves. In most of his novels there is very little authorial presence, even, or especially, when he is working in the first

---

[1] This and subsequent quotes are taken from Collins, Wilkie. *Armadale*. London: The Penguin Group, 1995.

person. Collins never condemns his characters. If anything, they are self-condemned.

Collins's aptitude for landscape painting in words is much in evidence in *Armadale*, perhaps more strongly than in any other novel. The first dramatic landscape we are presented with is the wrecked ship: "There, stranded midway between the rocky boundaries on either side of the Sound – there, never again to rise on the living waters from her grave on the sunken rock; lost and lonely in the quiet night; high, and dark, and ghostly in the yellow moonshine, lay the Wrecked Ship" (p. 121). Whilst they are temporarily stranded, Allan falls asleep and has a dream, or as Collins calls it, the "Landscape picture of the Dream". The whole plot is revealed through his dream, though the reader is not immediately aware of this foreshadowing. It does seem to the reader an extraordinary coincidence that Allan and Midwinter should happen upon the very same ship, a French vessel, in the Channel of the Isle of Man, far from where the murder occurred.

There is further dramatic use of these landscape pictures, most especially when the realisation of the visions of the dream occur. As the second vision is about to occur, the landscape changes dramatically from a sunny picture of peace and tranquillity, to one of foreboding:

> the water … was beginning to look black and cold. The solitude that had been soothing, the silence that had felt like an enchantment on the other Broad, in the day's vigorous prime, was a solitude that saddened here – a silence that struck cold, in the stillness and melancholy of the day's decline. (p. 260)

Lydia then appears to them standing by the side of Hurle Mere, the very picture of the second vision:

> The sun was sinking in the cloudless westward heaven. The waters of the Mere lay beneath, tinged red by the dying light. The open country stretched away, darkening drearily already on the right hand and the left. And on the near margin of the pool, where all had been solitude before, there now stood, fronting the sunset, the figure of a Woman. (p. 265)

Critical reviews of the novel were predictable. A work with such a strongly sensational bent, full of melodrama and mysticism, was bound to attract criticism from the moralistic reviewers, although it was well received by the public. The most strenuous objection was to the character of Lydia Gwilt, whom one reviewer called "fouler than the refuse of the streets, who has lived to the ripe age of thirty-five, and through the horrors of forgery, murder, theft, bigamy, gaol, and attempted suicide, without any trace being left on her beauty".[2] The creation of this character, and the presentation of her on stage, was to give Collins some troubles when dramatising the novel.

Though the professional production of play was to wait nearly ten years, Collins quickly wrote a dramatisation of *Armadale* to protect his rights, which was printed and registered at Stationers' Hall in 1866. One of his publishers, George Smith, obligingly printed 25 copies. Possibly because of the broad issues encompassed in the novel, Collins stated to a friend, "It has been a much harder task to turn the book into a play than I anticipated".[3] This first dramatisation, though he fully intended it for the purpose, never appeared on stage. Dickens, for one, though he was supportive, rightly surmised that the character of Lydia Gwilt could never stand upon the stage in widow's weeds, and declare to her lawful husband, Midwinter, "I am not your wife".

---

[2] Peters, p. 272.
[3] Sutherland, John, appendix to Penguin edition of *Armadale*, p. 711.

The play, *Armadale - A Drama in 3 Acts* follows the story of the book quite closely, whilst losing some of the mysticism and fate element of the novel. The action is necessarily curtailed to a degree, as is the scale of the cast; the characters are Allan Armadale, Midwinter, Dr Downward, Felix Bashwood, Lydia Gwilt, Miss Milroy, and Mrs Oldershaw.

Act I takes place in the park at Thorpe Ambrose. Mrs Oldershaw, Dr Downward and Lydia Gwilt meet to set a marriage trap for Allan Armadale. Lydia is being blackmailed by Oldershaw for some bills; Downward wants money for his sanatorium. Lydia hates Allan "because he is his mother's son"[4]; at the age of 12 she was forced to commit forgery by Allan's father. Allan and Neelie meet in another part of the park and plan their elopement. Lydia overhears that Allan is going to London. Midwinter finds Lydia alone and confesses his love to her. Lydia sees her way to a plan, to spread a rumour that she has eloped with Allan while she marries Midwinter in his true name.

Act II takes place in Lydia's lodgings, with Mrs Oldershaw and Dr Downward in the scene. Lydia has married Midwinter, Allan has been apparently killed as sea, and Lydia is wearing a widow's dress. Allan surprisingly returns, and Downward, as a message to Lydia, kills a fly in his presence to convey that Allan must die. Lydia plans the murder plot. Midwinter enters, and Lydia dramatically declares, "I am not your wife."

Act III takes place in Dr Downward's Sanatorium. As in the novel, there is a visitor's tour, and Allan is convinced by Downward that Neelie is staying there

---

[4] This and subsequent quotes are taken from *Armadale – A Drama in 3 Acts*, manuscript, British Library.

for a rest cure. Allan plans to stay the night. Midwinter, suspicious, changes rooms with Allan. Lydia has a long soliloquy whilst she is pouring the poison through the room's ventilation system. She then realises that Midwinter is in the room, saves him, then enters the bedchamber herself and dies. Downward is arrested.

Collins ultimately understood that Victorian audiences would never accept this version. He wrote to an acquaintance some years later, "My first attempt to adapt *Armadale* for performance … was [not] found suitable for this purpose and it has never been, and never can be, performed upon the stage".[5] In 1867, during his collaboration on a dramatic adaptation of the novel with Regnier, he travelled back and forth to Paris to work on it. He writes to his mother from Paris, "The play promises to do great things. The first act, in French, has been read to one or two good judges privately. They are quite astonished at the originality of it – and they predict a great success, if we can go on as we have begun".[6] Although this came to nothing, it did provide the structure for the play that was eventually to see the light of day in 1876, *Miss Gwilt*.

The play was given a trial run in at the Alexandra Theatre in Liverpool, in December 1875. The cast included young Arthur Pinero playing the part of Darch, the lawyer. Audiences were appreciative, Collins relaying to a friend that they "received the piece with open arms".[7] Pleased with its success, Collins opened the play on 15 April 1876 at the Globe Theatre in London. It was well received by

---

[5] Sutherland,appendix to *Armadale*, p. 712.
[6] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 283.
[7]Ibid., p. 399.

both the public and the critics, and had a respectable 12 week run. After the first night, Collins wrote to the same friend, "I was afraid to ask any of my friends to go to the first night. … I saw that the scenery was so backward and … so bad, and the people connected with this theatre … such a set of incapable idiots and blackguards – that I fully anticipated failure on the first night … The kindness of the audience … has really left me deeply grateful".[8]

This version differs considerably from the novel, although the scenes are more wide ranging than the first adaptation, and include a scene in Italy. Lydia is more of a sympathetic character, and much less of a one-dimensional villainess. The cast is also broader, with the characters of Major Milroy, Captain Manuel, Darch the lawyer, and various townspeople and servants.

Act I again takes place in the park at Thorpe-Ambrose. Major Milroy, an even more finely drawn character than in the novel, and Neelie are discussing the new governess. She is a "young woman", her age having been considerably reduced from the novel. They are discussing the death of Allan Armadale's uncle, from whom Allan has inherited the estate. The uncle saved a young woman from drowning in an attempted suicide, to his fatal detriment, and the doctor in attendance was Downward. It also transpires that Midwinter was the man on the same boat who went to fetch the doctor. The Mayor appears with Darch the Armadale lawyer, and requests to use the hall of the house to plan a welcome for Allan. Allan and Midwinter appear, and mingle unknown amongst them. After

---

[8] Ibid., p. 403.

Neelie is haughty to him, Allan reveals himself and they are invited to lunch at the Milroy house.

Midwinter, alone, reads a letter from his deceased father, detailing his real name, how his father killed his brother, and warning him to stay away from his cousin. Allan has offered him the post of steward at Thorpe Ambrose, but Midwinter doesn't know what to do. Miss Gwilt enters and is greeted by all.

Act II takes place in the interior of a fishing house at Thorpe-Ambrose. Neelie, the Major and Miss Gwilt are in the fishing house. Lydia is sketching an ancient statue. It is obvious that Neelie and Lydia have a difficult relationship. The Major hints that Lydia may have a bright future, as Allan keeps hanging around their cottage. Both Lydia and Neelie know, however, that it is for Neelie's sake, try as Lydia might to interest him in herself. Midwinter and Allan enter, and Allan, the Major and Neelie depart to see the fishing. Midwinter declares his love for Lydia, even though he knows of her suicide attempt. Downward, the real villain of the piece, enters, and interrupts the scene. He takes Lydia aside and asks about her plan to marry Allan, to which she replies that it will not work.

Downward, however, has the knowledge that Midwinter's real name is Allan Armadale, so he is not defeated. He encourages Lydia in the possibility of marrying Midwinter, if it is obvious that she cannot entrap Armadale. The Major, Neelie and Allan return, and Downward hints at the relationship between Neelie and Allan. The Major is incensed. He tells Allan that he must stay away for a year, and if he feels the same for Neelie after that time, he can court her. Allan submits. Downward, in the next room, speaks to Captain Manuel and tells him to

try and become captain of Allan's boat, and find a way to kill him. He agrees. Downward, acting as Lydia's surrogate father, blesses the union of Midwinter and Lydia, only if Midwinter marries her in his true name; he asks, to Midwinter's surprise, "In which of your two names do you ask her – Mr Allan Armadale, the second?"[9] Midwinter agrees. Lydia is unsure, and declares privately to Downward "you have forced me into marrying him!".[10] Downward will be the only witness at their wedding, and will also give Midwinter a job on his newspaper in Italy.

Act III takes place in Midwinter's lodgings in Naples. Midwinter and Lydia are married and happy - she loves him very deeply. Allan is visiting, but Lydia secretly hates him, because she is jealous of their relationship. Allan says he has found a new sailing master, but Midwinter is unsure and wants to approve him. Lydia reads out a passage from a local newspaper which Midwinter might use for a story, about a ship that went down where the captain was locked in the cabin by the first mate, and killed. Midwinter and Allan go off to the docks so Midwinter can inspect the potential crew on Allan's behalf, as he constantly feels protective of him.

Midwinter departs, telling Lydia that he is going to check coaches to the south, so he can pursue a story for the newspaper and they can get away together. She desperately wants to get him away from Allan. While he is gone, Captain Manuel appears, whom it turns out was once her lover. He only asks that she keep Midwinter from Allan, which she is in any case trying to do. He also takes some

---

[9] Collins, Wilkie. *Miss Gwilt.* London: Privately printed, 1875, p. 35.
[10] Ibid., p. 39.

of her jewellery, which she is happy to give him to get rid of him. He intimates that he may have said something to Allan about her past. He sees the passage in the newspaper, hints at the forthcoming murder of Allan, and departs.

Midwinter returns, and says the coach must depart immediately, and that there is only one place. He promises that he will return in a few days and that they will leave together. He knows that he is going on Allan's yacht for a few days sailing, but cannot bring himself to tell her, knowing that she would try to persuade him otherwise. She is desperate for him not to leave, but he does. Afterwards he sends a note saying he can't lie to her, and that he has gone on the yacht with Allan for two days. She realises that Manuel plans to sink the ship and that her husband has gone to his death. The gun sounds in the harbour before she can send her maid, Louisa, to stop him.

Act IV takes place in the drawing room of Miss Gwilt's lodgings in London. As she expected, the ship is reported lost with everyone on board. Lydia hardly cares about anything, having lost her husband; however, she tries to respect his memory in a soliloquy:

> I am hardened with a dreadful hardness. I am frozen up in a changeless despair. I feel the good that there is in me going day by day. I feel the evil gaining on me, little by little, with slow and stealthy steps. I dread myself! There is but one hope left for me. My husband's love – if he had lived – would have made me a good woman. The dear memory of him may soften and save me yet.[11]

Downward appears, and says she must prepare for an awful rumour, and that she cannot return to Thorpe Ambrose to spend the rest of her days in mourning,

---

[11] Ibid., p. 68.

because they all think she eloped with Allan. He persuades Lydia, in her despondent state, to present herself as Allan's widow, to get revenge on those who treated her badly when she was there, especially Neelie. She agrees, attracted to "the splendid wickedness of it", and they send Louisa off with a letter to the solicitor. However, she still suffers considerably more remorse than in the novel: "I am thinking of my dead husband. He was the soul of honour – he abhored deceit. His spirit may be looking down on me at the moment. I wish I had said no! I wish I had said no!"[12]

The Major and Neelie then arrive, and denounce Lydia while she is out of the room, also informing Downward that they have heard Allan and Midwinter are alive. They depart, and Allan arrives. Downward, still pursuing his plan, tells him that Neelie is in shock over the news of his supposed death, and is staying at his sanatorium. Allan arranges to meet the doctor there and departs. Downward hints to Lydia that Midwinter must by now know all about her past, and so she can never be at peace with him again as his wife. He arrives, she reads his looks, and believes that he does indeed know, although the audience is never certain that he does. He commands her to come with him because she is his wife. She does not move, and he asks, "Are you, or are you not my wife?", to which she replies, simply, "No".[13]

Act V takes place at Dr Downward's Sanatorium. Allan arrives, and Downward tells him Neelie cannot be disturbed, but if he arrives early in the morning at sunrise he can see her in the garden. Of his own accord, Allan

---

[12] Ibid., p. 73.
[13] Ibid., p. 81.

suggests he spend the night, to which the doctor agrees. Lydia and Downward discuss Allan. She hates him even more passionately now, because she blames him for driving her apart from her husband. She wants him dead. She suggests to Downward the means of killing Allan, as he is explaining his ventilation system regarding an asthmatic patient, and says that she will pour in the poison herself.

Midwinter arrives, and asks to spend the night as well, being suspicious of Downward. The doctor readily agrees, and also to Midwinter's suggestion that he spend the night in the empty room next to Allan's. After the doctor departs, they change rooms. Lydia comes in to pour the poison. Midwinter's candle is affected by the poison, and he calls out for Allan. Lydia hears his voice, drags him out, finds one of her love letters in his hand, and is overcome with remorse in a speech:

> My letter! My letter, written to him in the first days of our marriage! Oh, my husband, was there a little corner in your heart still left for me? How can I be grateful for the love that has not quite forgotten me, even yet! There is one way, and but one! I can free him from me forever! (*She stoops over him and kisses his forehead.*) The last kiss, love! – a dying woman has that privilege, even when she is a wretch like me! (*She rests Midwinter's head on the back of the chair, and takes the bottle from the table*). The one atonement I can make to him is the atonement of my death. Oh, he lives! He looks at me![14]

Allan comes out, and she tells him to look after Midwinter and give him air, while she walks into the room and locks herself in to die.

There are several differences to the story in the play; Lydia's mother was responsible for driving the brothers apart in the previous generation. She therefore has a horror and fear of Allan because of this, so that she, rather than Midwinter,

---

[14] Ibid., p. 101.

has the fatalistic view of their meeting. Lydia is a somewhat weaker character, losing her power in becoming merely a pawn of Dr Downward. She is, in the words of *The Times* reviewer, "more sinned against than sinning"[15]. The story has also lost all its mysticism and the dream-like quality of the novel. However, Ada Cavendish triumphed in the role.

Once again, Collins has stripped all the supernatural elements from the novel in adapting it into a play. It is evident that he didn't think this belonged onstage, and could not have been a fan of gothic melodrama. All his plays are much more naturalistic than his novels. There is still something of the fate element in what Midwinter feels about protecting Allan, especially after he reads the letter from his father, but Lydia is the more superstitious.

Critical reviews of the play on the whole saw it as praiseworthy, although there were the now expected comments about morality, as evidenced by Cook: "The supply of poisoned air is not confined to the last scene; the atmosphere throughout is oppressively miasmic".[16] *The Times*, especially, following the pattern of earlier reviews, praised his potential as a dramatist, but still felt that he hadn't quite reached his full capabilities:

> Generally well, and in some instances very well acted; constructed with great care, and a just appreciation of the difference between the arts of the study and the stage, nor, most assuredly devoid of either interest or incident, it seems at first sight difficult to determine wherein this play of *Miss Gwilt* falls short of the highest standard of merit to which it is possible for such plays to attain. … There is unquestionably a sense of something wanting, of something very nearly, but never quite, obtained, the lack of which has just managed to rob the piece of the success which

---

[15] *The Times*, 17 April, 1876.
[16] Cook, p. 118.

> should have been the due of the merits of the novel, and the approved dramatic skill of the novelist.[17]

*The Times* reviewer seems to feel that Collins had the potential to become one of the foremost dramatists of the day, but never quite appreciated what Collins was trying to do. Collins, as mentioned above, had a preference for French theatre, and spent his successful dramatic years trying to bring the French neo-classical style to the English stage. Somehow, reviewers seem to have missed the point, as he was appreciated as a dramatist; "Mr Collins has before now shown a knowledge of what is required in this style of work, which no professional dramatist of the day has yet shown us. … His novels, as seen upon the stage, are … carefully finished and consequent dramatic pieces",[18] but the movement towards the *piece bien fait* on the English stage was not to come until the last decade of the century.

*Miss Gwilt* was revived later in the decade, and Ada Cavendish took it to New York in 1879 where she enjoyed another success. Collins, ever solicitous of his friends, wrote to his friend William Winter, a theatrical impresario in New York,

> I am reminded that my 'New Magdalen' Ada Cavendish sails on the 24th to try her fortune in the United States. She has, I think, more of the sacred fire in her than any other living English actress of 'Drama' – and she has the two excellent qualities of being always eager to improve and always ready to take advice in her Art. I am really interested in her well-doing, and I am expecially anxious to hear what <u>you</u> think of her. In the 'Magdalen' and also in 'Miss Gwilt' (a piece altered, from 'Armadale', by Régnier (of the Théatre Français) – and by myself) she has done things which electrified our English audiences. If you should be sufficiently interested in her to give her a word of advice in the art, she will be grateful, and I shall be grateful too.[19]

---

[17] *The Times*, 17 April 1876.
[18] Ibid.
[19] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 414.

Collins was next to tackle what many consider his greatest novel, *The Moonstone*, and adapt it for the stage. This, his last professionally produced play, was to be his greatest dramatic work on his terms, and the one most closely aligned to his dramatic theories.

# CHAPTER TEN

## *THE MOONSTONE*

*The Moonstone* was Collins's last successfully produced play, adapted from the novel that was, with *The Woman in White*, his most successful novel, and his most remembered work of fiction. Although this is now under dispute, it had long been considered the first English detective story (this has now been said to be *The Notting Hill Mystery* of 1865 by Charles Felix). If one is to make a case for *The Notting Hill Mystery* one could also take into account Collins's short story "A Stolen Letter" in the 1856 collection *After Dark,* which could also be called the first English detective story. "Crime" or "Sensation" Fiction can encompass many kinds of mystery and crime story, and Collins's novels are littered with amateur sleuths such as Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright from *The Woman in White*, the Reverend Brock from *Armadale*, or Valeria from *The Law and the Lady*. But in *The Moonstone* he brings in a professional Detective as a main character, called in to solve a crime. Ten years later, this was the first play to put a detective on stage in a central role.

*The Moonstone* was serialised in *All The Year Round* from 4 January to 8 August 1868, and published the same year. T.S. Eliot called it "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels".[1] As with *The Woman in White*, the serialisation greatly increased the circulation of Dickens's paper, this time to an even greater extent than *Great Expectations*. "Detective-fever" had gripped the reading public as assuredly as it had the characters in the novel. It is unique among Collins's novels in keeping the secret from the reader until the very end, throughout the long unravelling of the mystery. Again, as in *The Woman in*

---

[1] Peters, p. 275.

*White*, the story is told through several characters' eyes. It is his most tightly constructed work. With this novel there were to be no reviewers finding discrepancies in dates.

The story first unfolds in the words of Gabriel Betteredge, head steward in Lady Verinder's country house. This first narrative is strongly imbued with his character, his moralising from *Robinson Crusoe* (which he uses as a sort of bible), and his opinionated view of people and events. The pieces of the puzzle are successively put into place by various narrators; Miss Clack, a distant relative, Matthew Bruff the solicitor, Ezra Jennings, the doctor's assistant, and Sergeant Cuff. The whole first part of the story is told after the fact, as each person is asked by Franklin Blake to remember what happened.

On the night of her birthday, Rachel Verinder is given a priceless diamond, The Moonstone, bequeathed to her by her Uncle, the black sheep of the family. Franklin Blake, her cousin (who is also in love with her) is the executor of the Uncle's will, and who worries whether this bequest represents genuine forgiveness for a family slight (her mother snubbed him when he was still alive) or revenge – the diamond is supposed to carry a curse. Franklin also suspects that three Indians are trying to retrieve the diamond, to restore it to a temple in India from which it was stolen. In any case, Rachel is not concerned, and loves the diamond. She wants to keep it with her, in an unlocked cupboard, overnight. Everyone is concerned, not least Franklin Blake. In the morning, the diamond is gone.

Franklin, deeply concerned and blaming himself firstly for bringing it to her, and secondly for not insisting on locking it up, takes it upon himself to get the

police on the case, including calling down a detective from London, the famous Sergeant Cuff. Rachel refuses to assist in any way in solving the case, and is unaccountably angry with anyone who tries to do so. This leaves Sergeant Cuff to come to one final conclusion, that Rachel stole the diamond herself. Her mother, Franklin, and the old servant Bettterdge cannot believe this. A paint smeared nightgown would provide the clue, but they cannot search the laundry because of Rachel's obstructiveness.

Tragically, Rosanna Spearman, one of the maids who is suspected of being an accomplice in the theft (and a former thief herself), takes her life by throwing herself into a pit of quicksand, the Shivering Sands, a place with which she had an unhealthy obsession. The house party breaks up, and Franklin leaves for the Continent. Rachel's other cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, a doer of good works, is also suspected in the theft. Rachel swears to his innocence. Franklin returns from the continent a year later, determined to solve the mystery himself, with the help of Betteredge. He is given a letter from Rosanna which instructs him to go to the Shivering Sands. There he discovers, preserved in a tin case, the missing nightgown with the thief's name. Again we encounter a character with a second self – this time it is Franklin Blake under the influence of opium.

This is a subject which Wilkie knew very well by this point, at a time when he probably damned himself forever to his laudanum addiction. He was leaning heavily on the drug as a result of a number of emotional upheavals. Firstly and most traumatically, during the writing of the novel, his mother died. Also, Caroline Graves, his companion for many years, had left him to marry another

man. It was fortunate that her daughter stayed on with Collins to perform many secretarial tasks for him. His physical state was very bad at this time, and he was taking large doses of laudanum. He knows, therefore, exactly what he is talking about in the novel, when he puts words into Ezra Jennings's mouth words about the effects of opium. The influence of the opium unknowingly administered to Franklin Blake is the key to the whole mystery, and is not revealed until the penultimate narrative of the novel. Ezra Jennings explains it to Franklin:

> The action of opium is comprised, in the majority of cases, in two influences – a stimulating influence first, and a sedative influence afterwards. Under the stimulating influence, the latest and most vivid impressions left on your mind – namely, the impressions relating to the Diamond – would be likely, in your morbidly sensitive nervous condition, to become intensified in your brain, and would subordinate to themselves your judgment and your will – exactly as ordinary dream subordinates to itself your judgment and your will. … When the morning came, and the effect of the opium had been all slept off, you would wake up as absolutely ignorant of what you had done in the night as if you had been living at the Antipodes. (p. 442) [2]

Collins's powers of visual description in the novel are again in evidence, most especially when describing the Shivering Sands. It is a naturally eerie place, but, as the place of Rosanna Spearman's obsession, it plays a pivotal part in the story, and moves the action along. It is the place where Rosanna first sees Franklin Blake and develops her fatal attraction, which leads to her covering up the truth; "The tide was on the turn, and the horrid sand began to shiver. The broad brown face of it heaved slowly, and then dimpled and quivered all over"(p. 58). Franklin at that point makes his first appearance in the novel. It is then the

---

[2] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie. *The Moonstone*. London: The Penguin Group, 1998.

place where the evidence is hidden as to who took the Moonstone. The next visit to the spot foretells the doom for which it is responsible:

> The last of the evening light was fading away; and over all the desolate place there hung a still and awful calm. The heave of the main ocean on the great sand-bank out in the bay, was a heave that made no sound. The inner sea lay lost and dim, without a breath of wind to stir it. Patches of nasty ooze floated, yellow-white, on the dead surface of the water. Scum and slime shone faintly in certain places, where the last of the light still caught them on the two great spits of rock jutting out, north and south, into the sea. It was now the time of the turn of the tide: and even as I stood there waiting, the broad brown face of the quicksand began to dimple and quiver – the only moving thing in all the horrid place. (pp. 160-161)

Later it is the place where Rosanna destroys herself, thereby sealing up the truth, supposedly forever. But finally, it is where the truth is discovered, which is a traumatic event in itself. Every time there is a turning point in the story it happens at the Shivering Sands. Finally, when Franklin comes to retrieve the box which Rosanna threw into the sands, thus hiding his guilt, the Sands evoke a different mood:

> The sunlight poured its unclouded beauty on every object that I could see. The exquisite freshness of the air made the mere act of living and breathing a luxury. Even the lonely little bay welcomed the morning with a show of cheerfulness; and the bared wet surface of the quicksand itself, glittering with a golden brightness, hid the horror of its false brown face under a passing smile. … The turn of the tide came, before my cigar was finished. I saw the preliminary heaving of the Sand, and then the awful shiver that crept over its surface – as if some spirit of terror lived and moved and shuddered in the fathomless deeps beneath. (p. 356)

The sand gives up its secret, revealing to Franklin that the paint-smeared nightgown bears his own name.

The first edition of *The Moonstone* (it was reprinted many times, and in fact has never been out of print) was published in 1868; the play was, again, to

appear almost a decade later. It was produced in September 1877, at the Olympic Theatre, under the management of the actor, Henry Neville. *The Moonstone: A Romance* is probably Collins's most ambitious theatrical work taken from one of his greatest novels, though novel and play are very different in style. The play becomes intimate, keeping the essence of the book yet concentrating more on the love story between Franklin and Rachel and their feelings for each other rather than the mystery, or the diamond itself and its complicated history. The play retains the humour and character of the novel. To encapsulate the essence of the story into twenty four hours, capturing the very heart of the plot involving the Moonstone: Franklin's unknowing culpability, Godfrey's guilt, Sergeant Cuff's detection, whilst retaining the humorous element in the persons of Miss Clack and Betteredge, was no mean feat. At the very core of the story is Franklin's and Rachel's love, which is in effect the essence of the play.

The cast of characters is reduced to Gabriel Betteredge, played by J W Hill; his daughter, Penelope (Miss Gerard), Dr Candy (Robert Pateman), Franklin Blake (Henry Neville), Rachel Verinder (Miss Bella Pateman), Miss Clack (Laura Seymour), Sergeant Cuff (Thomas Swinbourne) and Godfrey Ablewhite (Charles Harcourt). Collins describes the very neat stage setting thus:

> The action of the drama extends over twenty four hours, and passes entirely in the inner hall of MISS VERINDER'S country-house. At the back of the hall is a long gallery, approached by a flight of stairs, and supposed to lead to the bedchambers of the house. The stairs must be so built that persons can pass backwards and forwards behind them, in the part of the hall which is situated under the gallery. Two of the bedchamber doors, leading respectively into the rooms occupied by FRANKLIN BLAKE and GODFREY ABLEWHITE, are visible to the audience. The other rooms are supposed to be continued off the stage on the left. The entrances

are three in number. One, under the gallery, at the back, supposed to lead to the staircase in the outer hall and to the house door. One on the left, at the front of the stage, supposed to led to RACHEL'S boudoir and bedroom. And one opposite, formed by a large window, which opens to the floor, and which is supposed to lead into a rose garden. The fireplace is on the left, just above the door leading into RACHEL'S room. The stage directions refer throughout to the right and left of the actors as they front the audience.[3]

Act I begins with Betteredge, announcing that his mistress is unexpectedly arriving from town with her cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, and Miss Clack. Betteredge is in a flap and he and his daughter Penelope prepare the hall. Franklin Blake arrives without prior notice, bringing a "legacy" to Rachel, in the shape of the Moonstone. Betteredge explains the mystery behind The Moonstone:

> I shouldn't get through the catalogue of the Colonel's misdeeds if I was to talk till tomorrow. My late lady, Miss Rachel's mother, was (as you know) the Colonel's sister. She refused to see him or to speak to him. She held him, rightly, to be a disgrace to the family. He was as proud as Lucifer, and his sister wounded him in his one tender place. "You have publicly shut your door in my face," he wrote to her. "sooner or later I'll be even with you for doing that." Here (*he holds up the box*) is the proof that he was as good as his word. He knew by his own bitter experience that the Moonstone carried a curse with it; and he has left it to Miss Rachel in revenge.

Whilst he is waiting for Rachel and the others to arrive, Franklin spends time varnishing an old cabinet, which the workmen were to have finished before Rachel's unexpected arrival. There is to be a dinner that evening, to which the local doctor, Dr Candy is also to be invited. Rachel and the others appear, and she is not displeased to see Franklin. However, she overhears him telling Godfrey about a poor Frenchman to whom he owes money in flippant terms:

---

[3] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Moonstone: A Dramatic Story in Three Acts*, privately printed, 1877.

> Speaking generally, my debts don't trouble me the least in the world. But there's one of my creditors who won't be pacified - a little hunchbacked Frenchman who keeps a restaurant in Paris. (*He goes on more and more carelessly, laughing as he speaks.*) His wife is in bed, and his child has got the whooping cough, and the little crook-back wants money. I only borrowed two hundred pounds of him, and he writes furious letters to me, calling me a thief!

She is horrified at his behaviour, and roundly berates him: "A poor struggling man who has trusted you - and who finds in the hour of his distress that your promise to pay him back his money is a mockery and a delusion! And you speak of it lightly! In your place I would have sold the watch out of my pocket, and the rings off my fingers, rather than be dishonoured as you are dishonoured now". They sit down to supper, and Betteredge teases Miss Clack about her liking for dry champagne; "I think you like it dry, Miss? (*Aside, looking at the bottle in his hand.*) And plenty of it!" Miss Clack discusses the Mothers Small Clothes Conversion Society, and asks Rachel if she may set up a branch in the neighbourhood.

Franklin is not feeling well, mostly on account of having quit smoking suddenly, in order to please Rachel. He says his nerves are on edge. Dr Candy advises him not to eat supper, which he is not accustomed to eating, nor to drink spirits, which he is again not used to. Franklin is bemused that, although Dr Candy advises against him doing so, he is eating and drinking happily, and so follows suit. Mr. Candy relates a case of somnambulism to Godfrey in the following discussion, to set the scene for Franklin's transformation. In this way Mr. Candy becomes the authority that Ezra Jennings was in the novel:

> *Mr. Candy*. Like Mr Blake there, my patient was not accustomed to eating supper, and he was tempted to try the experiment by some friends. He ate heartily, and he afterwards drank spirits, which he

was not in the habit of doing either. … After one glass of grog each the party rose from the table, and adjourned to another room for a little music. The lad followed them, and sang too. … Conversation followed the music. Our young fellow joined in, and began to talk in an odd, absent way … . Most of the party thought the poor wretch must be a little tipsy. One of them, rougher than the rest, gave him a shake, by way of sobering him, I suppose. He jumped up with a scream of terror, and looked about him in the wildest confusion. In plain English, he woke!

*Godfrey*. What! Had he been asleep all the time?

*Mr Candy*. Fast asleep and dreaming, with his eyes open!

*Godfrey*. After only eating supper?

*Mr Candy*. No! no! after eating when he was not accustomed to eat, and drinking what he was not accustomed to drink. That makes all the difference. … He stared in astonishment; he no more knew what he had been doing than you did before I told you of the circumstances.

After the supper, Franklin presents Rachel with the diamond, to the astonishment of all. The diamond is put in the newly varnished cabinet, which doesn't lock. Franklin is worried, asks Godfrey to take it to his father's bank in town in the morning, and Godfrey agrees. Everyone retires.

Rachel comes out of her room, unable to sleep, and in soliloquy reveals her feelings for Franklin.

> I am so restless, the limits of my own room won't hold me! I feel as if I should never sleep again. What sort of night is it? (*She crosses to the window and draws one of the curtains. The high window, reaching to the cornice, is seen protected by a broad iron-sheathed shutter, which covers two-thirds of it from the floor upwards. Through the uncovered glass at the top, the moon appears. Its light streams into the room over the place occupied by the cabinet.*) Oh, the beautiful moonlight! How peaceful! What does my wakefulness mean? Am I thinking of the diamond? Or thinking of Franklin? (*She glances at the cabinet.*) No! I won't look at the Moonstone. There's something evil in the unearthly

light that shines out of it in the dark. Ridiculous! I am as superstitious as poor old Betteredge himself! (*She pauses, lost in thought.*) Franklin! I wish he hadn't spoken in that cruel way of the poor deformed man who lent him the money in Paris. It wouldn't matter if I didn't love him. But I do love him – dearly! And I can't bear to feel that he has disappointed me. I almost doubt him! (*Another pause.*) I won't think any more of Franklin – at least, not tonight! I'll get a book, and read myself to sleep.

As she finishes speaking, Franklin comes down the stairs. She watches unseen as Franklin takes the diamond, with the bright moonlight shining in from the window stage right, on the cabinet. Rachel is horrified as she watches: "Is Godfrey right? Have his debts utterly degraded him?" Franklin returns to his room, Rachel returns to hers, and the act ends. However, the curtain doesn't come down – instead, the light slowly changes, from moonlight, to dawn, to daybreak, as the fire in the fireplace dies down. This is a very striking effect that would not be out of place in a theatre today.

At the beginning of Act II, Betteredge is the first to discover that the diamond is gone. Franklin sends a telegram for the London police, followed shortly by the arrival of Sergeant Cuff, who was already in town investigating another case. He declares that this case is much more interesting and has thrown up the other case. Cuff discusses his passion for roses with Godfrey: "If you will look about you, sir – which most people won't do – you will see that the nature of a man's taste is, nine times out of ten, as opposite as possible from the nature of a man's business. I began my life among the roses in my father's nursery garden, and I shall end my life among them if I can. Yes, one of these days I shall retire from catching thieves, and try my hand at growing roses". Rachel is horrified that Franklin has called in the police, when she saw him take the diamond herself.

When the coast is clear, she gets Franklin's dressing gown and hides it in her room, questioning herself the whole time: "I have saved from exposure a degraded wretch who is unworthy of my interest – unworthy of my pity. Oh, how ashamed of myself I feel! I never knew how meanly I could behave until now". She will not speak to Franklin, nor co-operate with the police. Sergeant Cuff, however, takes it upon himself to enter her room whilst she is out, and produces Franklin's dressing gown with the declaration, "I've got the thief". Franklin is bewildered that it is his.

In the ensuing scene, still disturbed about Franklin, she becomes engaged to Geoffrey, while Miss Clack listens behind a curtain (hearing some disparaging remarks about herself). Franklin returns to the house, though Rachel refuses to see him, and to get to the bottom of Rachel's obstructiveness, he hides in Betteredge's room. He appears to Rachel, and they have a dramatic scene in which she says what she saw:

> *Rachel* (*melting into tears*). Don't speak of it Franklin! You break my heart! Why do you come here to humiliate yourself? Why do you come here to humiliate me? Are you afraid I shall expose you? Have you not seen for yourself that I can't expose you? I can't tear you out of my heart! No matter how falsely I may be suspected, no matter how vilely I may be wronged, the secret of your infamy is safe in my keeping!
>
> [FRANKLIN *draws back from her slowly, overwhelmed by her last words.*
>
> *Franklin* (*in low tones of horror*). My infamy!
>
> *Rachel*. I would rather have lost fifty diamonds, than see your face lying to me as it lies now!
>
> *Franklin* (*staggering back*). You believe that I stole the diamond?

> *Rachel* (*following him up furiously*). Believe? I *saw* you steal the diamond with my own eyes!!! (FRANKLIN *throws up his hands with a faint cry, and drops in a swoon at her feet.* RACHEL *starts back with a cry of horror*). Oh God! Have I killed him? Help! Help!

A telegram from Cuff arrives declaring, "I've found The Moonstone", which ends the second act.

Act III begins with Sergeant Cuff returning the Moonstone to Rachel, having obtained it from a money-lender in town. Rachel is not by any means reassured that Franklin did not pawn it himself. Mr Candy arrives, however, and reminds everyone of the conversation about somnambulism from the previous night. It is agreed that as a trial, supper will be sent up to Franklin, and he will be persuaded by Betteredge to have a glass of spirits. This trial is to take place without Franklin's knowledge. In the meantime, Rachel enlists Miss Clack's help in getting her out of her engagement to Geoffrey, and she does so with glee.

Everything is ready for the trial, and Rachel, Betteredge, Mr Candy and Cuff await the outcome. As expected, Franklin comes downstairs in his sleep, goes to the cabinet, and removes the Moonstone, replaced after having been retrieved by Sergeant Cuff. Godfrey arrives, perplexed, but Franklin goes straight to him and hands it to him. Godfrey plays innocent, but it is obvious that Franklin had given it to him the previous night. Cuff steps in and tells everyone that Godfrey was indeed the person who pawned the Moonstone, and also that he had been in town originally to investigate a case of embezzlement against him. When Cuff was contacted by Franklin, he knew that Godfrey would be somehow involved.

Franklin, meanwhile, has fallen asleep in an armchair, oblivious to all that has passed. Rachel dismisses everyone from the room, and allows no one else to watch over him. She, however, cannot resist, and kisses his forehead. When he awakes asking "who is it," she replies, "only your wife". The curtain falls.

It is not just the reduction of the number of characters which sets apart this, Collins's last successful play. In almost every dramatic adaptation of his novels he greatly reduced the number of characters, but stuck very closely to the development of the plot. In this case, everything extraneous and melodramatic to a theatrical production was cut, leaving a play that is, by the standards of today, a well-crafted, concise drama.

In the play, events unfold as they happen, and not after the fact. It is a lively re-telling of the story, leaving out what could not be dramatised (most importantly, Rosanna Spearman). In any case, as with *The Woman in White*, everyone would have known what the story was, and who stole the Moonstone, so there could be no surprises for the audience. Collins needed to make it a good play, not just a re-showing of the great story. There was no way he could capture the suspense of the original on the stage, especially the suspense of serialisation. He could not possibly produce anything resembling the novel on stage, as in the novel the same story is told repeatedly by several different people.

Collins was also trying to bring the Aristotelean three unities, (unity of time, place and action) into the English theatre. *The Moonstone* is his greatest success in this regard as the action takes place in 24 hours and in the same place. The three unities were the backbone of French classical drama, the kind of drama

that Collins admired most. Dickens shared his admiration, even though he made fun of the unities in *Nicholas Nickleby*, or rather, the English perception (or misconception) of the unities. Nicholas and Miss Snevellici are canvassing the townspeople of Plymouth for support for her benefit night, and visit a couple of "patrons of the theatre":

> The unities, sir … are a completeness – a kind of universal dovetailedness with regard to place and time – a sort of general oneness, if I may be allowed to use so strong an expression. I take those to be the dramatic unities, so far as I have been enabled to bestow attention upon them, and I have read much upon the subject, and thought much.[4]

The production of *The Moonstone* had a respectably successful run of nine weeks. Initially, Collins once again approached the Bancrofts to produce the play. Though Marie Bancroft was sorely tempted by the part of Miss Clack (with Squire Bancroft considering Sergeant Cuff), in the end it "was thought by Wilkie Collins and ourselves to be, perhaps, too melodramatic in its treatment for the Prince of Wales theatre, and better suited to follow the great success of the same author's *New Magdalen* at the Olympic".[5] If this play was considered a melodrama, clearly the definition of melodrama was changing, from the melodramas of the 1850's to the much more restrained *Moonstone* from Collins's pen in the 1870's.

Henry Neville, in the end, was the right choice to put on this production, as he and Collins must have had similar views about acting style, and an understanding of the French theatre. Neville was interested in the theories of François Delsarte, "the most philosophical acting teacher of the nineteenth

---

[4] Dickens, Charles, *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 280.
[5] Bancroft, Sir Squire and Lady Marie Effie. *On and Off the Stage*. London: Bentley & Son, 1888, p. 62-3.

century".[6] The principles of the Delsarte System greatly influenced actors and dancers in America, notably Steele MacKaye (another good friend of Collins's, who acted in England in the mid-1870s), Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn. Briefly, George Taylor defines his system as this: "the psyche was defined as Body, Soul and Mind, and its functions as Vital, Emotional and Intellectual. From this triad he developed a highly complex system, which correlated psychological impulses with particular zones of the body".[7]

Henry Neville wrote an article on 'Gesture' which contained Delsartian principles, which was published in *Voice, Speech and Gesture: A Practical Handbook to the Elocutionary Art*. Clearly Neville had some interest in and understanding of the French style of acting.[8] Through his friendship with Steel MacKaye, who studied under Delsarte in 1871, Collins would have known about his system as well, and about the fact that it had influenced the French actor Coquelin, one of his favourite actors. Frank Archer relates a conversation he had with Collins in 1887, the last time he was to see him, where they discussed favourite French actors, of which Coquelin and Frederic Lemaître were given the highest accolades by Collins.

*The Moonstone*, as evidenced by the reviews and the length of the run, was well received, although the critics had some reservations. *The Times* declared:

> Rarely we think, has Mr Wilkie Collins displayed more ingenuity and more knowledge of scenic effect than in the version of *The Moonstone* which was played for the first time on Monday night. But he has not quite succeeded. Yet we cannot call to mind any living writer for the stage who would have been more successful [in adapting his own work] … He has

---

[6] Taylor, George, p. 149.
[7] Ibid., p. 149.
[8] Ibid., p. 150.

> exhibited a self-denial rarely found in those novelists who are allowed to prepare their own works for representation.[9]

The reviewer was also pleased that "It was not necessary to know one line of the novel in order perfectly to understand the play. The work is complete as a drama". He also commented, more than once, on the breathless and attentive state of the audience, and sums up, "It would be difficult to say what the public will think of this play, but if silence and breathless attention mean interest the performance will hold its own".[10] It seems that reviewers weren't quite sure what to make of the play, as it was ahead of its time. The play did, however, hold its own for nine weeks.

Miss Clack was the noted actress Laura Seymour's last role, and unfortunately neither she nor the role were deemed successful. Laura Seymour was a long time friend of Collins, and he was delighted that she was to play the part. Though he said to her, "I am quite confident about Miss Clack and the public with *you* to make them known to each other"[11] this was not the case. *The Times* felt that Miss Clack "was the weak point of the novel and is the weak point of the play" and that Mrs Seymour was "burdened with an ungrateful part".[12]

Laura Seymour was reputed to be a great beauty, and had gone on the stage at the age of fourteen, to keep herself and her younger sister after being left orphans. She acted under Macready in Dublin, and married a middle-aged man who had been kind to her. She met Charles Reade in 1854 in a joint theatrical

---

[9] *The Times,* 19 September 1877.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Peters, p. 380.
[12] *The Times*, 19 September 1877.

venture. The following year he became her lodger, and they lived together until her death. Collins and Reade were close friends, and shared, among other things, a great love of the theatre. Reade himself wrote many plays.

Collins had many close women friends, and one of the closest was Nina Lehmann, wife of Rudolf Lehmann. She was an intelligent and gifted woman, being an accomplished pianist of concert standard. Collins's nickname for her was "The Padrona". A letter from her to her husband is a tribute to their long and close friendship: "...steady friendship that continues for nearly twenty years, always the same, always kind, always earnest, always interested, always true, always loving and faithful – that is worth the name of friendship indeed. I value my Wilkie and I love him dearly".[13] These women friends, however, could never visit Collins at home because of his interesting situation. Laura Seymour, however, could do so, and she, Reade, Collins and Caroline were intimate friends in the 1860s and 1870s.

Cook, who also found that the part of Miss Clack "wearies far more than she amuses", went even further in disparaging this, Laura Seymour's final part, considering her "an actress prone to exaggeration and indiscreetly anxious to be droll".[14] Though he had reservations about the play, and found that "the drama gratifies less than the novel", he did, however, recognise Collins's success in transforming his own novel, and in encapsulating the three unities:

> It is only fair to add that when the conditions under which Mr Collins elects to write allow of his being dramatic, he is very dramatic indeed ... The scene in the third act where Rachel denounces her lover as a thief ... is admirably forcible and

---

[13] Peters, p. 271.
[14] Cook p. 156.

> effective. And generally it may be said that the author has displayed excellent skill in contriving a compact drama out of such superabundant materials. There is no incoherence or unintelligibility. … Mr Collins's constructive power has even tempted him to unusual regard for the prescriptions of classical drama".[15]

*The Telegraph* had more to say about *The Moonstone*:

> It seems to us that Mr Wilkie Collins should be congratulated on his success in a somewhat paradoxical fashion. He has admirably succeeded in not failing. He has tempted his audience to the very verge of the ludicrous, but has averted the laugh by a miracle. A dozen times there is the temptation to a titter, but the author checks it with a singular cleverness.[16]

The reviewer then hit upon exactly what Collins was trying to do, and brings into the review "the theory so constantly advocated by Mr Wilkie Collins that the best play is that which hides the secret from everyone but the audience".[17] This all but defines the well-made play. This was not to be understood, however, until the *piece bien fait* was to reach its prominence in the English theatre in the 1890s and beyond.

Collins's last play was set in Ramsgate, a place which he knew extremely well. Known for the "freedom of its manners",[18] which would of course suit Collins down to the ground, Ramsgate was a place where he spent many summers on holiday with Martha and the children as "Mr and Mrs Dawson", whilst Caroline's grandchildren would be around the corner on a similar summer jaunt.

---

[15] Ibid., 154-55.
[16] *The Telegraph*, 19 September 1877.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Peters, p. 390.

The children often played together. He also went sailing from Ramsgate with his old friend from *The Leader* days Edward Piggott, now the Examiner of Plays.

*Rank and Riches*, Collins's last play on the professional stage, was produced at the Adelphi Theatre, opening on June 1882. It ran for one week. It was a failure with both the public and reviewers. It is a great overstatement, however, to say that he vowed never to write for theatre again. According to Frank Archer, Collins was planning a new stage version of *The Woman in White;* he sent a copy of the play to Archer in 1884, saying "I mean to alter it further (before the piece is played again) in the way of simplifying the story if possible. The great fault of the work at present is the intricacy of the story".[19] The famous American actress, Mary Anderson, who turned down a play written for her by Oscar Wilde, asked Collins to write her a play. He also hoped that his play, *The Evil Genius,* based on his novel of the same name, would see production, and in preparation it was given a copyright performance at the Vaudeville in 1885.

*Rank and Riches* is concerned with an aristocratic family, The Earl of Lavercock, his daughter Lady Calista, and his sister, Lady Shirlock. Lady Calista, engaged to the Duke of Heathcote, is uneasy with her social position and unearned status. This is a subject that Collins had not attempted before, concentrating on the upper classes. He does, however, include a republican, in the character of the Italian bird doctor, Mr. Dominic (rather in the vein of Professor Pesca). The other personages of the play include, Joyce Woodburn, Calista's former maid; Alice Ryecroft, her new maid; Cecil Cassilis, a lawyer's clerk, who performs a service,

---

[19] Archer, Frank, p. 253.

unknowingly, for Lady Calista; and an English ruffian, Jessup, who is also a republican. It is notable that George Alexander, later knighted for his services to drama, played the clerk Cecil Cassilis in the piece.

The play begins with The Earl of Lavercock being told that his daughter has gone for a walk in the park by herself, unheard of then for a Lady. He is annoyed, and prays out loud to God that she were married and off his hands. Mr Dominic next appears on the scene, and in soliloquy relates that he is a refugee, and that he makes ends meet by ministering to the birds of the richer class. He intimates he knows a secret about Lord Lavercock's past. By this point, according to reviewers, the audience was already confused, *The Times* stating, "When the curtain drew up on this hopeless play the audience were cudgelling their brains for a considerable time to get at the drift of the plot obscured at the outset by a long-winded and utterly irrelevant story told by Mr. Anson in the character of a second hand Fosco".[20]

Cecil Cassilis next enters. It turns out that Dominic also knew Cecil's father, and knows some secret about Cecil as well, asking why he is in so humble a position when his father was a gentleman. Cecil relates to him that when he worked at a bank in a position of trust, he was sent with a large sum of money to another bank. On the way, he met a "friend", who then drugged and robbed him. Not being able to prove this, and the friend having disappeared, he was disgraced. It then transpires that Dominic knows the friend who drugged and robbed him, and

---

[20] *The Times*, 11 June 1883.

that this man is now dying and wants to confess and make amends, restoring Cecil's good name. Cecil is overjoyed and they arrange to meet the friend.

Lady Calista enters, relating how she was accosted in the park whilst alone and that she was saved by a gallant young man. We learn that she is bored with her life, and takes it upon herself to have projects for the good of others, as in the case of her maid, Joyce Woodburn, who is not well, and so is being sent to Calista's aunt's in the country to rest. Cecil now re-enters, and, coincidentally, he turns out to be the man who saved Calista in the park. She is suitably grateful, and is also rather taken with him. Her new maid Alice then arrives, and falls in love with Cecil at first sight.

It next becomes obvious that Cecil was injured by his struggle in rescuing Calista, and, as Dominic is a doctor as well as a vet, he can see that Cecil may have broken a few ribs. This makes their plan to go to meet the penitent friend difficult. Dominic explains the situation to Calista, and as a mark of her gratitude she resolves to go in their places, even though the meeting is at a public house. She convinces her new maid to come with her against her wishes, and borrows Joyce's cloak as disguise.

At the public house, they interrupt a republican meeting. The friend, Alfred Norman, is the secretary of this society, and the women are brought before the meeting. Calista, asked for her name, unthinkingly gives it as Joyce Woodburn. She is asked to take a republican oath and drink a toast, which she does. Jessup, the man who accosted her in the park, is at the meeting and recognises her. The meeting breaks up, and Calista is able to obtain the signed

confession from Alfred Norman who then dies. Unbeknown to her, Jessup follows them home.

Act II takes place in Ramsgate, a few months later. Lady Calista and Cecil have a passionate scene, admitting their love for one another, and she explains herself in these terms:

> Have some pity on me! It is my hard lot to hold a place in the world for which I am by nature unfit. Over and over again I try to submit myself to the conventional splendours of my life, and the untenable spirit in me revolts, control it as I may. My engagement to the Duke was one of those vain efforts at me resigning myself to my circumstances. And I suffer the penalty of it now.[21]

The Duke arrives, and realises that they are in love, and reasonably offers to both Cecil and Calista that she take a month to choose between them; "Do you love her well enough to give her time to think? … as her own heart guides her so let her choose between us". Alice, the maid, meanwhile, is lurking in the background.

Act III takes place in Lady Calista's boudoir the day before her wedding to the Duke. Cecil has not been able to wait for her to choose. Lady Shirlock, Calista's aunt, encounters Jessup who asks for "Joyce", telling how he saw her at a public house. Lady Shirlock sends him away, resolving that she will not have Joyce in her household if she is the kind of person to frequent public houses. Calista tells everyone assembled that it was actually she herself in the public house but no one will believe her, thinking she is mad. She calls in Alice as a witness, who has truly gone mad because of her misplaced love for Cecil. She attempts to kill Calista with a pair of scissors, but is restrained and taken away. Dominic is

---

[21] This and subsequent quotes taken from *Rank & Riches*, Wilkie Collins, manuscript, British Library.

conveniently on the scene, bursting to reveal his secret, but only if absolutely necessary.

Finally in Act IV, the secret is revealed – Lord Lavercock's parents were not lawfully married, because he, Dominic, is the first husband of Lavercock's mother. Lavercock, therefore, has no right to his title, and Calista is not a lady. The Duke relinquishes Calista to Cecil, promising to help him become an MP. They are happily united. "The double gulf of rank and riches" between them, Cecil's words of Act II, is removed.

> *The Times* of 11 June 1883 begins its review thus:
>
> Bad plays and silly plays have been very properly condemned by independent audiences at every period of stage history from the days of Oliver Goldsmith to those of Alfred Tennyson. … Had it not been for the courtesy of an unusually patient and considerate audience, it would have been laughed off the stage long before the third act arrived, and very properly condemned as a silly and unaccountably feeble exercise in dramatic art. For many years the faith of an audience has not been so severely tried as it was on Saturday night.[22]

Clearly there are problems with the play, relying as it does so heavily on coincidence, and the character of Dominic who seems to know everyone and their secrets. But the politics of the piece were what ultimately brought about its downfall. Calista drinking a toast in a low public house, "Englishmen rise in your might, and shut up the House of Lords" – was found to be utterly unbelievable. This was Victorian England, after all, and the play would probably have worked better in France. Catherine Peters notes that *The Times* obituarist, when writing

---

[22] *The Times*, 11 June 1883.

about Collins, stated that *Rank and Riches* "succeeded well in America",[23] although she was able to find no record of this. It is interesting to think that there might have been an American production, at which they would probably have cheered the republicans, and Calista for drinking the toast. Whether or not the *Times* obituarist made it up, knowing the proclivities of the Americans, it is also an interesting speculation.

Also deemed unbelievable were both Calista's and Alice's attraction to Cecil. Perhaps this was due more to the actor's playing of Cecil than to an unbelievable conceit – "love at first sight" was indeed a facet of many of the more popular Victorian novels. *The Times* found that "The only actor with whom there was any pronounced sympathy was Mr Charles Sugden, who played the loyal Duke quietly, naturally, and effectively. But then the Duke of Heathcote was apparently the only sane or intelligible person amidst a crowd of visionary and intangible shadows".[24]

*The Times* reviewer also states the audience was suppressing laughter throughout, out of courtesy for Collins. This time, there was none of Collins's legendary "stage fright" or cowering in dressing rooms. He stood at the back of the dress circle with Arthur Pinero, with a flower in his buttonhole, no doubt ready to take a curtain call when he was called for. But what happened? Both Collins and the producer, Edgar Bruce (no novice himself to the theatre), were reasonably confident of the success of the piece. Collins himself read the play on three separate occasions to theatrical experts, all of whom predicted success; he wrote to

---

[23] Peters, p. 403.
[24] *The Times*, 11 June 1883.

William Winter, "I read the piece three times, to audiences of 'experts' – and not one of them had the faintest forewarning of what really happened".[25] *The Athaneum* reviewer put the failure down to over-elaboration, "sufficiently hazardous in fiction … impossible in drama".[26] Certainly the story is over elaborate. However, on reading, it is more coherent than some contemporary critics seem to think. Other problems include the fact that the piece is too long, and that there are some holes in the story. But none of these problems were unknown to many a Victorian theatrical piece.

Another great problem, however, and one which probably damaged the reception of the piece more than any other element, was the outburst between acts of G.W. Anson, stage manager and Dominic in the production. Theatre audiences the world over, now and then, are renowned for their independent-mindedness. An actor could not get away with berating an audience for not liking a play, certainly in Victorian times. *The Times* describes it thus:

> The Stage Manager, Mr. Anson, trembling with excitement, presented himself in front of the curtain. The sufferers imagined, of course, that he was about to announce the unfortunate failure of a play that had not a moment of success in it, and very sensibly to report that the last act would not be given. On the contrary, the stage manager proceeded, in the worst possible taste, to bully and browbeat the audience, and to commit himself to a dictatorial indiscretion such as is, happily, without a complete parallel.[27]

Sadly he was never forgiven by the British public, and he emigrated to Australia to finish his career there. *The Times* continues:

> Mr Wilkie Collins is unquestionably a very able and popular dramatist, but there is no special reason why an audience should be

---

[25] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 459.
[26] Peters, p. 403.
[27] *The Times*, 11 June 1883.

> dictated to or lectured in his case for doing that which has been done before in the case of Fielding, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Lamb, Tennyson, and the scores of writers who have striven their best to please and failed.[28]

So ended, at least publicly, the stage career of Wilkie Collins, playwright. Collins himself, in his letter to Winter, believes that it was because he was "fool enough to trust an 'Adelphi audience' … as incapable of understanding the piece as if it had been written in Hebrew".[29]

---

[28] Ibid.
[29] *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 459.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

# CONCLUSION

Collins continued to write plays. His next theatrical work was an adaptation of his novel, *The Evil Genius*, written simultaneously as a novel and play. It was an ambitious work to attempt to put on stage in 1886, with divorce as a central theme. This could be hinted at as little as 10 years later with Henry Arthur Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan*, but even then the heroine Susan does not follow through with her initial wish to leave her husband, though her own infidelity in retaliation for her husband's is broadly hinted at.

*The Evil Genius*, play and novel, is concerned with the family of Herbert, Catherine, and young daughter Kitty Linley. Mrs Presty, Catherine's mother, is the stereotype of "the mother in law". A young, pretty governess, Sydney Westerfield, is appointed, an orphan who was cruelly treated by her aunt, and she is idolised by Kitty. She is also deeply grateful to Herbert Linley for her "rescue", and unfortunately they find themselves attracted to one another, eventually admitting their mutual attraction. Herbert feels that he must confess his feelings to Catherine and swears on his honour that they have only wronged her in thought, not in deed. Catherine arranges for Sydney to be a governess at a neighbouring house.

Kitty, however, is left desolate, and falls into a dangerous illness, which can only be cured by Sydney's appearance at her bedside. Catherine agrees, while Herbert leaves the house, so as not to see Sydney. He asks for news of Kitty's progress which is never sent to him. The experiment is tried and is successful. It remains for Sydney to tell Herbert when he returns, desperate for news; they kiss, are found by Catherine, and leave together. Contemptuous of her husband,

Catherine says to Sydney, "Miss Westerfield, you have saved my child's life. Take him".

Catherine, Kitty and Mrs Presty live together in quiet retirement. Herbert communicates to Catherine that he would like to have Kitty with him for six months of the year, which she refuses. She is advised by her lawyer, Mr Sarrazin (a character along the lines of Professor Pesca), that her only means of keeping her daughter with her is to divorce, or else the law is on Herbert's side. With great reluctance she consents, and she is eventually granted a divorce in the Scottish courts, and full custody of Kitty. This move proves costly, however, in the eyes of Society. The divorce trial is recorded fully and faithfully in the newspapers, and to the name Linley is attached great notoriety. In trying to escape this, Catherine adopts her maiden name, calling herself "Mrs Norman". Go where she may, however, she excites the interest of the people she meets with her beauty and manners; they all wonder about "Mr Norman", and she is eventually found out. Mrs Presty attempts to convince Catherine that she must call herself a widow, but Catherine refuses, not wanting to tell Kitty her father is dead.

Herbert and Sydney, meanwhile, are beginning to feel the ill effects of their guilty life together. Herbert has begun to fall out of love with Sydney, and when the Divorce is granted, tellingly, he does not offer to marry her. Although he would never desert her, she has begun to feel the loss of his former attachment to her. She contemplates joining a nunnery, but cannot quite take the final step towards Roman Catholicism. Desperate for a new scene, they decide to travel to

the seaside (probably in the area of Sidmouth), the very place where Catherine, Kitty and Mrs Presty have been taking the sea air.

The character of Captain Bennydeck, having been introduced earlier as an acquaintance of Herbert's brother, Randal, comes into the story at this point. Captain Bennydeck is a sympathetic character, a Roman Catholic who embodies the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. He tries his best to help the underprivileged, especially "fallen women", for whom he has recently set up a home. A confirmed bachelor, he encounters Catherine and Mrs Presty at the seaside, and is immediately struck by Catherine's great beauty. Mrs Presty is able to hint, in Catherine's absence, that Catherine is a widow. Bennydeck has another interest involved in the story, in that he is an old friend of Sydney's father. He has been searching for Sydney for many years, in the hopes that he could help her after the father's death. Randal knows that the woman he is searching for is Sydney, but, given the circumstances of her life with Herbert, he cannot reveal to Bennydeck where she is.

Sydney and Herbert then come to the hotel, occupying the very rooms in which Catherine and the family had been staying. He discovers a book which Catherine had inadvertently left behind, which he had given her on their first wedding anniversary. He is devastated at finding this reminder of her, and also the scant regard in which she must now hold him. He gives way to tears, and Sydney enters the room. She surmises the truth of his feelings, which confirm her suspicions. She later slips out of the hotel, leaving him.

Herbert learns from the Society Pages in the newspaper that the "captivating widow" Mrs Norman is soon to be engaged to Captain Bennydeck. He suspects it is Catherine and attempts to see her, only to meet the Captain. In the meantime, Sydney has endeavoured to meet Catherine, telling her that she has left Herbert and entreating her to forgive him, as a last attempt at atonement for her sin. Bennydeck, having proposed marriage to Catherine, believes that she has accepted, but realises that there is something wrong. He meets with Herbert, who attempts to reveal that he is Catherine's divorced husband when Mrs Presty intervenes – by bringing Catherine to meet Herbert outside the room. Catherine shows him a letter she has written to the Captain, telling him everything. Upon reading the letter he says it is best that Catherine marry the Captain, and forget him. Catherine, however, cannot go through with the deception and does give the Captain the letter. He admires her and loves her even more for her truthfulness, forgiving her the falsehoods which she permitted to be told, in these terms:

> Bennydeck: Is there any human character, even the noblest, that is always consistently good?
>
> Catherine: One reads of them sometimes, in books.
>
> Bennydeck: Yes, in the worst books you could possibly read – the only really immoral books written in our time. … they deliberately pervert the truth. Clap-trap, you innocent creature, to catch foolish readers! When do these consistently good people appear in the life around us, the life that we all see? Never! Are the best mortals that ever lived above the reach of temptation to do ill, and are they always too good to yield to it? [1]

[1] This and subsequent quotes are taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Evil Genius*, manuscript, British Library.

However, as a Roman Catholic, he cannot consent to a marriage with a divorced woman, and though it breaks his heart, they must part. In parting he entreats her to undo the lie told to Kitty, and let Herbert see his child.

Catherine, her mother and Kitty go into retirement in the country. The difficulty of letting Kitty, who believes her father is dead, see Herbert is solved when he comes upon Kitty in the grounds of their cottage, and with the logic of a child, she realises that it is indeed her father. In her rapturous joy she remembers her mother, and knowing nothing of the bitterness between her parents, brings Herbert to meet Catherine, thereby reuniting the mother and father. They end by remarrying, to the disgust of Mrs Presty, who is indeed the "Evil Genius" of the family. It is hinted at the very end that Captain Bennydeck and Sydney, who has become his secretary at the Home, will marry.

Randal has this to say about the remarriage of Catherine and Herbert, straight from the pen, and feelings, of Collins himself:

> "Don't misunderstand me. Where there is absolute cruelty, or where there is desertion, on the husband's part, I see the use and the reason for Divorce. If the unhappy wife can find an honourable man who will protect her, or an honourable man who will offer her a home, Society and Law, which are responsible for the institution of marriage, are bound to allow a woman outraged under the shelter of their institution to marry again. But, where the husband's fault is sexual frailty, I say the English law which refuses Divorce on that ground alone is right, and Scotch law which grants it is wrong. Religion, which rightly condemns the sin, pardons it on the condition of true penitence. Why is a wife not to pardon it for the same reason? Why are the lives of a father, a mother, and a child to be wrecked, when those lives may be saved by the exercise of the first of Christian virtues – forgiveness of injuries? In such a case as this I regret that Divorce exists." (p. 244) [2]

---

[2] This and subsequent quotes taken from Collins, Wilkie, *The Evil Genius*. Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1994.

Collins could very well of been thinking of his old friend Frances Dickinson in addressing the subject of divorce once again, even more closely.

Collins is able to bring up subjects close to his heart once more, in the character of Mr Sarrazin. The lawyer is of French descent, but born and bred in England. His ancestry shows through, however, particularly in his gastronomic tastes; over dinner with Randal, he delights in truffles, and waxes eloquent on sauces: "I don't like to cast a slur on English cookery. But think of melted butter, and tell me if anybody but a foreigner (I don't like foreigners, but I give them their due) could have produced this white wine sauce?" They discuss Randal's trip to America, and Collins is able to pronounce both on the American people, and his pet hate, the American copyright law, still not amended at the time of writing, in this exchange in the play:

> Randal: I have been enjoying myself among the most hospitable people in the world.
>
> Sarrazin: A people to be pitied … their Government forgets what is due to the honour of the nation. … In this way. The honour of a nation which confers right of property in works of art, produced by its own citizens, is surely concerned in protecting from theft works of art produced by other citizens.

The characters of Randal, Sarrazin, and even sometimes Mrs Presty, are the voice of the author in the novel, which is lively and more readable than some of his later works.

The one immediate contrast to the novel, at least for the reader, is the initial stage note on Mrs Presty's character. Where Mrs Presty is the voice of

Society to the detriment of her character, in the novel, and the "Evil Genius" of the story, Collins sets out these instructions for the actress who would portray her:

> It is of importance that the character of Mrs Presty should be acted so as to produce a favourable impression on the audience. She is naturally a good natured woman, with a turn for satirical humour. But she is too readily influenced by her strong prejudices, and her love of domineering. She speaks sharply from want of tact; and is not herself aware of it when she hurts the feelings of persons about her.

Mrs Presty in the novel is a less than sympathetic character, and perhaps Collins felt that she came across as too harsh. There are only a few instances where, contrary to her normal self, other characters are surprised by her sudden humanity. Although in the text of the play she is the same harsh personage as on the novel page, Collins felt strongly enough to add this author's note to the actress.

The play in its structure is almost identical to the novel, with just the necessary trimming to put it on stage, very similar to Collins's adaptation of *The New Magdalen* in following exactly the plot of the novel. The play begins with Kitty's birthday party, and we are given some exposition on Sydney's past through Mrs Presty's conversation with Randal. Mrs Presty has arrived at her daughter's house as a result of a letter from a neighbour, praising both Sydney's beauty, and her gratitude to Herbert Linley. By the time the play has started Sydney and Herbert are already aware of their guilty love, and Herbert confesses this to Catherine, after she overhears, and dismisses, a conversation between her mother and Randal. The first act ends with Sydney's dramatic departure, and Kitty distraught.

Captain Bennydeck appears in the second act as a person who has come to view the picture gallery of the house, which is open to the public. He meets Randal by accident, and the same immediate warmth is apparent between them; in the novel Randal declares; "I can't account for it; I only know I took a liking to Captain Bennydeck." The Captain retires when he hears of Kitty's illness, which is apparent at the beginning of the act. Events follow the same course as in the novel, and the act ends with Catherine's dramatic statement of, "Take him".

Act III begins in the small seaside village where people go on the advice of their doctors for a "rest cure". Whilst Collins has his own authorial opinions in the novel, in the play, he puts his feelings even more succinctly into the words of Mrs Presty: "This quiet village of yours has been puffed into importance by a famous physician. The one hotel in the place is our hotel; and the foolish English are all rustling into it like sheep – with the doctor for the dog who drives them". Collins must have known many of these small villages on the south coast from his yachting jaunts, and most likely have regretted the transformation of such charming fishing villages into "fashionable watering places".

After Kitty has been snubbed by her playmates as the daughter of a divorced woman, which Catherine feels deeply, and which Mrs Presty calls "the personal gossip so dear to the English public", they encounter Captain Bennydeck, who is noticeably charmed with Catherine. Mrs Presty and the Captain are left alone, where she is able to deliver a line straight from the novel, which must have given Collins some particular delight to write. Captain Bennydeck is utterly captivated by Kitty, but Mrs Presty tells him, "You wouldn't be quite so fond of

other people's children, if you were a married man". Collins surely knew the joys, and tribulations, of bringing up children. The Act ends with Catherine, Herbert and Sydney meeting when Catherine comes to retrieve her book, and with Sydney's ultimate flight.

Unfortunately, the manuscript in the British Library ends here, at the end of the Third Act. This manuscript shows a play of humour, intelligence and delicacy in dealing with the subject, which had its copyright performance and no more. According to Catherine Peters, it had been refused by three managements in the United States, and negotiations in England with the producer Carl Rosa eventually broke down.[3]

Contemporary critics, and modern ones as well, consider that in the period between Robertson in the 1860's and the dramatic writers of the 1890's there was a lack of playwrights who were considered at least a decent dramatist by today's standards, presenting something apart from the always popular melodrama and extravaganza. W. S. Gilbert was one such dramatist, before his successful librettist work with Sullivan, with his ironic and sometimes savage comedies from the 1870's. Theatre was decidedly moving away from melodrama even before the 1890's and the mannered plays of Wilde, Jones, Pinero and Shaw. Mostly new to the plays of the 1890's was a fear of social exposure, social disgrace, and being found out.

Another actor who appeared in one of Collins's plays and who subsequently wrote for the stage, was Wybert Reeve. Judging by their titles alone,

---

[3] Peters, p. 418.

*A Match for Mother-in-Law; I Love You; Never Reckon your Chickens*; there is not much to recommend his plays to the modern theatre audience. The first of these, *A Match for Mother-in-Law,* was a comediatta in one act and was first performed at the Theatre Royal, Manchester in 1859. This would have been just one of the items on an evening's lengthy bill. There are five characters, and Reeve took the main part. It is a mildly amusing comedy, easily read (or watched) but just as easily forgotten. *I Love You*, a thirty minute one act play, shows a slightly more mature author. It is basically a two-hander (with a small part for a servant) and has crisper dialogue and some clever word play. Again this was one item on an evening's bill, this particular bill being the provincial tour of *The Woman in White* in 1871. Reeve took the lead character with Eliza Saville as his leading lady. This main part is a great contrast to the character of Fosco, which would have been the main item of the evening. *Never Reckon Your Chickens* is yet another light comedy, performed at the Olympic Theatre on Boxing Night in 1870 under the management of Henry Liston, with Frederick Robson in the cast. Although these three examples are respectively called comedietta, one act play, and farce, they are much the same thing, and are pleasant but utterly forgettable. They could be likened to the "situation comedies" which litter television programming today, most especially in America.

Collins died just months after the first performance of an Ibsen play in London in June 1889, which brought about a slow but steady change to the development of theatre from then on. Collins died in September of 1889. He would have been too ill to go to the theatre in June, having been unwell for most

of the year, and having had a stroke on 30 June. One must wonder what he would have thought of this "new" kind of theatre, which after all was still a "well-made play". He would, no doubt, have appreciated the advances made by both Ibsen and Chekov, including this passage from *The Seagull*:

> In my opinion the theatre today is in a rut, and full of prejudices and conventions. When I see the curtain rise on a room with three walls, when I watch these great and talented people, these high priests of a sacred art depicting the way people eat, drink, make love, walk about and wear their clothes, in the artificial light of the stage; when I hear them trying to squeeze a moral out of the tritest words and emptiest scenes – some petty little moral that's easy to understand and suitable for use in the home; when I'm presented with a thousand variations of the same old thing, the same thing again and again – well, I just have to escape. [4]

This first Ibsen production had a lasting influence on the course of English drama, most importantly that it "made the unhappy ending in domestic drama acceptable to audiences".[5]

With reference to the situation of censorship in the latter part of the century, whilst it is clear that more freedoms were allowed on the stage in the 1890's, it was still touch and go as to what would pass the censor's pen, and what would not be admitted. William Archer writes in an unsigned article published in the *Westminster Review*:

> Let it be thoroughly understood by those who believe in the censorship as a bulwark of public morality, that it was established in its present form as a shield for political immorality. … it has been alternately tyrannical and futile, odious and ridiculous. By its own confession it is inconsistent, and has admitted today what it prohibited yesterday, with no change in the circumstances to justify the change of front. By its own confession it is futile, having no power to enforce some of its most important directions. It can suppress a play which touches upon an ethical problem, but it cannot

---

[4] Chekhov, Anton, *The Seagull*, Penguin Classics edition (1954), p. 123.
[5] Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 173.

> prevent an indecent 'gag' or an immoral double-meaning conveyed by the actor's look or gesture. … It is destructive, since it takes out of the people's hands a power which they along can rightly wield, and thus deadens their feeling of responsibility for the morals of the stage.[6]

He then goes on to discuss Pinero's *The Squire*, in which a man who believes himself to be a widower marries another woman, but only finds out that his first wife is alive as his new wife is about to become a mother. Archer states,

> the very last emotion which the heroine should experience is shame. … She would see that the moral quality of an act committed in unavoidable ignorance of certain circumstances affecting it, is not in the least changed by the fact of these circumstances becoming known. Had this been clearly shown, the play would have been moral in the best, indeed in the only true, sense of the word – but it would probably never have been played. As it was, Mr Pinero never even suggested this view of the case.[7]

By this time, Collins's old friend and sailing partner, Edward Piggott, was the Examiner of Plays. Although every Examiner was probably unpopular, Shaw had some very strong words for this particular Examiner:

> He had French immorality on the brain; he had the womanly woman on the brain; he had the Divorce Court on the brain; his official career in relation to the higher drama was one long folly and panic, in which the only thing definitely discernible in a welter of intellectual confusion was his conception of the English people rushing towards an abyss of national degradation in morals and manners, and only held back on the edge of the precipice by the grasp of his strong hand[8]

Some of these subjects sound very close to Collins's heart.

> Unlike many of the dramatic authors of the 1870's and 1880's, and similar to the dramatists of the last decade of the century, Collins cannot really be

---

[6] Jackson, pp. 328-331.
[7] Ibid., pp. 328-331.
[8] Ibid., p. 301.

pigeonholed into a particular genre. Though we might (mistakenly) class *The New Magdalen* as a melodrama, it does not have the stock characters or the requisite triumph of good over evil – Mercy Merrick, after all, a former prostitute, is rewarded with a husband. Possibly the Bancrofts were right – *The Moonstone* is the most 'melodramatic' of his plays although this is not a 'melodrama' in the Victorian sense of the word; it is not a comedy either, although there are comic scenes with Miss Clack and Betteredge. This play, as with his others, is not easily classifiable, and his work as a whole bears more resemblance to the "problem plays" of Jones, Pinero and Shaw in the 1890's. If Collins had lived a little longer, or perhaps theatrical managements had been a bit bolder, he could have seen his *Evil Genius* on the stage.

Oscar Wilde is set apart, played today, and remembered for his wit, flippancy and the effervescence of his writing. Yet there are still some stereotypical characters in his plays; Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband* makes a good red-haired villainess, along the lines of Lydia Gwilt. Wilde himself wrote this letter to Alexander in the summer of 1894 about one of his plays (*The Importance of Being Earnest*): "The real charm of the play, if it is to have a charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight, but I think, adequate … Well, I think an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit might be made."[9]

Even if the playwrights of the 1890's were rejecting the style of the mid to late Victorian period, a through line of the playwrights of the 1870's (Collins's most prolific decade) cannot be denied. Squire and Marie Bancroft had an indirect

---

[9] Ibid. p. 298.

influence by supporting and encouraging Robertson in his writing. Pinero wrote to Squire Bancroft, on Lady Bancroft's death, declaring, "Robertson was a man of vision and courage. There is no dramatist now writing, 'advanced' or otherwise, who is not in a measure indebted to Robertson".[10] Collins himself wrote some excellent plays, considering the quality of much what was being written and produced at the time. He was completely up to date with contemporary theatre practice, and part of the group changing and challenging traditional theatrical literature, and the move towards dramatic realism. Collins had many theatrical friends, throughout his life, and always kept close ties with the theatre. Apart from having people in the business as close personal friends, this was very useful when it came to having his plays produced. Out of the group of popular and prolific playwrights of the time, including Dion Boucicault, Robertson, Bulwer-Lytton, F.C. Burnand and H.J. Byron, perhaps only Robertson and Collins could be said to have advanced the genre.

Altogether Collins was a most un-Victorian Victorian, a writer of strong beliefs and opinions that not even Dickens's opinions could change (he would never agree to Dickens suggestion that he tone down the prefaces he wrote for his novels); a man, unmarried, with two households; who went his own way in his artistic style, ignoring the reviewers. Happily the reading, and play-going public, for the most part, appreciated that style.

---

[10] Donaldson, Frances, p. 32.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

# PRIMARY SOURCES

## PLAYS BY WILKIE COLLINS:


Armadale, a Drama in Three Acts. London, privately printed, 1866.

Black & White. MSS, British Library.

The Evil Genius. MSS, British Library.

The Frozen Deep. MSS, British Library.

The Lighthouse. MSS, British Library.

Man and Wife. London, privately printed, 1873.

Miss Gwilt, A Drama in Five Acts. London, privately printed, 1875.

The Moonstone: A Dramatic Story in Three Acts. London, privately printed, 1877.

The New Magdalen, A Drama in Three Acts. London, privately printed, 1873.

Rank & Riches. MSS, British Library.

The Red Vial. MSS, British Library.

The Woman in White, a Drama in Four Acts. London, privately printed, 1871.


## WORKS BY WILKIE COLLINS (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER FROM DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION):


Memoirs of the Life of William Collins Esq., R.A.. (2 vols.). London: Longman & Co., 1848.

Antonina, or The Fall of Rome. (3 vols.) London: Richard Bentley, 1850.

Rambles Beyond Railways; or, Notes in Cornwall Taken A-Foot. London: Richard Bentley, 1851.

Mr Wray's Cash Box: or The Mask and the Mystery. London: Richard Bentley, 1852.

Basil: A Story of Modern Life. (3 vols.). London: Richard Bentley, 1852.

Hide and Seek. (3 vols.). London: Richard Bentley, 1854.

After Dark. (2 vols.). London: Smith, Elder, 1856.

The Dead Secret. (2 vols.). London: Bradbury & Evans, 1857.

The Queen of Hearts. (3 vols). London: Hurst & Blackett, 1859.

The Woman in White. (3 vols.). London: Sampson Low, 1860.

No Name. (3 vols.). London: Sampson Low, 1862.

My Miscellanies. (2 vols.). London: Sampson Low, 1863.

Armadale. (2 vols.). London: Smith Elder, 1866.

The Moonstone. (3 vols.). London: Tinsley, 1868.

Man & Wife. (3 vols.). London: F.S. Ellis, 1870.

Poor Miss Finch. (3 vols.). London: Richard Bentley, 1871.

The New Magdalen. (2 vols.). London: Richard Bentley, 1873.

Miss or Mrs? And Other Stories in Outline. London: Richard Bentley, 1873.

The Frozen Deep and Other Tales. (2 vols.). London: Richard Bentley, 1874.

The Law and the Lady. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1875.

The Two Destinies. (2 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1876.

The Haunted Hotel. (2 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1879.

A Rogue's Life. London: Richard Bentley, 1879.

The Fallen Leaves, First Series. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1879.

Jezabel's Daughter. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1880.

The Black Robe. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1881.

Heart & Science. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1883.

I Say No: or The Love Letter Answered. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1884.

The Evil Genius. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1886.

The Guilty River. Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1886.

Little Novels. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1887.

The Legacy of Cain. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1888.

Blind Love. (3 vols.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1890.

WORKS BY WILKIE COLLINS CURRENTLY IN PRINT:

Armadale. (1866) Edited with an Introduction by John Sutherland. London: The Penguin Group, 1995.

Basil. (1852) Edited with an Introduction by Dorothy Goldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

The Black Robe. London: Chatto & Windus, 1920.

Blind Love. (1890) Toronto, Canada: General Publishing Company, 1986.

The Dead Secret. (1857) Edited with an Introduction by Ira B. Nadel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

The Evil Genius. (1886) Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1994.

The Fallen Leaves. (1879) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1994.

The Frozen Deep & Mr Wray's Cash Box. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1996.

The Haunted Hotel. London: Constable, 1982.

Heart & Science. (1883) Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1996.

Hide and Seek. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1981.

I Say No. (1884) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995.

Iolani; or, Tahiti as it was. Edited with an Introduction by Ira B. Nadel. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Jezabel's Daughter. (1880) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995.

The Law and the Lady. (1875) Edited with an Introduction by Jenny Bourne Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

The Legacy of Cain. (1888) London: Chatto & Windus, 1923.

Man & Wife. (1870) Edited with an Introduction by Norman Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Miss or Mrs?, The Haunted Hotel, The Guilty River. Edited with an Introduction by Norman Page and Toru Sasaki. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The Moonstone. (1868) Edited with an Introduction by Sandra Kemp. London: The Penguin Group, 1998.

My Lady's Money. (1877) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1990.

The New Magdalen. (1873) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1993.

No Name. (1862) Edited with an Introduction by Virginia Blain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

No Thoroughfare and Other Stories. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1990.

Poor Miss Finch. (1871). Edited with an Introduction by Catherine Peters. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

A Rogue's Life. New York, New York: Dover Publications, 1985.

The Two Destinies. (1876) Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995.

The Woman in White. (1860) Edited with an Introduction by John Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

The Yellow Mask & Other Stories. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1987.

Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction. Julian Thompson, ed. London: Robinson Publishing Ltd., 1995.

WRITINGS BY CHARLES DICKENS used in this thesis

Dickens, Charles. David Copperfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Dickens, Charles. The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Dickens, Charles. A Collection of Letters of Dickens. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889.

Dickens, Charles. The Letters of Charles Dickens. Ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

OTHER CONTEMPORARY SOURCES:

Anonymous. The Woman in White: A Play in Two Acts. MSS, British Library.

Anderson, Mary. A Few Memories. London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1896.

Archer, Frank. An Actor's Notebooks. London: Stanley Paul and Company, 1912.

Archer, William. English Dramatists of Today. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1882.

Arnold, Matthew. "The French Play in London". *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review.* (August 1879), pp. 240-242.

Bancroft, Sir Squire and Lady Marie Effie. On and Off the Stage. London: Bentley & Son, 1888.

Bancroft, Sir Squire and Lady Marie Effie. The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years. London: John Murray, 1909.

Boucicault, Dion. Plays. Edited with an introduction and notes by Peter Thomson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Chekov, Anton. The Seagull. London: Penguin Classics, 1954.

Cook, Edward Dutton. Nights at the Play. A View of the English Stage. London: Chatto & Windus, 1883.

Forster, John. The Life of Charles Dickens. London: J M Dent & Sons, 1987.

Hutton, Laurence, ed. Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892.

Jones, Henry Arthur. The Renascence of the English Drama. London: Macmillan and Company, 1895.

Lewes, George Henry. On Actors and the Art of Acting. London: Smith Elder and Company, 1875.

Morley, Henry. The Journal of a London Playgoer. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974.

Reeve, Wybert. 'Recollections of Wilkie Collins', *Chamber's Journal* 9 (June 1906), pp. 458-461.

Reeve, Wybert. From Life. London: F.V. White & Co., 1892.

Reeve, Wybert. I Love You. Lacy's Acting Edition of Plays, vol. 98, London: Samuel French, 1871.

Reeve, Wybert. A Match for Mother-in-Law. French's Acting Edition of Plays, vol 118, London: Samuel French, 1859.

Reeve, Wybert. Never Reckon Your Chickens. Lacy's Acting Edition of Plays, vol. 95, London: Samuel French, 1871.

Shaw, George Bernard. Our Theatre in the Nineties. London: Constable & Company, (revised and reprinted), 1932.

# SECONDARY SOURCES


Ackroyd, Peter. Dickens. London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1991.

Ashley, Robert. Wilkie Collins. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1976.

Auerbach, Nina. Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Auerbach, Nina. Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Ashton, Rosemary. G.H. Lewes: A Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Ashton, Rosemary, ed. Versatile Victorian. Selected Writings of George Henry Lewes. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992.

Axton, William F. Circle of Fire. Dickens's Vision and Style and The Popular Victorian Theatre. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966.

Baker, Michael. The Rise of the Victorian Actor. London: Croom Helm Limited, 1978.

Barrett, Daniel. T.W. Robertson and the Prince of Wales's Theatre. New York, New York: P. Lang, 1995.

Bingham, Madeleine. Henry Irving and the Victorian Theatre. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978.

Booth, Michael. English Melodrama. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965.

Booth, Michael, ed. Hiss The Villain. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964.

Booth, Michael, ed. The Lights O' London and Other Victorian Plays. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Booth, Michael. The Magistrate and Other Nineteenth Century Plays. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Booth, Michael. Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979.

Booth, Michael. Theatre in the Victorian Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Booth, Michael, ed. Victorian Theatrical Trades: Articles from *The Stage* 1883-1884. London: Society for Theatre Research, 1981.

Brannan, Robert Louis, ed. Under the Management of Mr Charles Dickens: His Production of "The Frozen Deep". Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.

Brashear, Barbara Ann. Wilkie Collins: From Novel to Play. Unpublished thesis, Case Western Reserve University, 1972.

Brooks, Peter. The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976.

Chesney, Kellow. The Victorian Underworld. London: Penguin Group, 1991.

Clarke, William M. The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins. London: Allison & Busby, 1988.

Clarke, William M. and William Baker, ed. The Letters of Wilkie Collins. 2 Vols. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999.

Collins, Brenda. Charles Kingsley: The Lion of Eversley. London: Constable and Company, 1975.

Daniels, Barry. Revolution in the Theatre. French Romantic Theories of Drama. London: Greenwood Press, 1983.

Davis, Nuel Pharr. The Life of Wilkie Collins. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956.

Davis, Tracy C. Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture. London: Routledge, 1991.

Davis, Tracy C. The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

De La Mare, Walter. 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins', in The Eighteen Sixties. ed. J. Drinkwater. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932.

Dexter, Walter, ed. Dickens to His Oldest Friend. London: Putnam, 1932.

Dickens, Sir Henry F. Memories of My Father. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1928.

Donalsdon, Frances. The Actor Managers. Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1970.

Eagelton, Marty and Pierce, David. Attitudes to Class in the English Novel. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1979.

Ellis, S.M. Wilkie Collins, LeFanu and Others. London: Constable, 1951.

Elwin, Malcolm. Charles Reade, A Biography. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1931.

Fawcett, F. Dubrez. Dickens the Dramatist. London: W H Allen, 1952.

Forster, John. The Life of Charles Dickens. London: J M Dent & Sons, 1987.

Foulkes, Richard. Church and Stage in Victorian England. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Gasson, Andrew. Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hadley, Elaine. Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalzed Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Heller, Tamar. Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992.

Hemmings, F.W.J. The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

House, Humphrey. The Dickens World. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942.

Howarth, William D. "From Neo-classical to Romantic Aesthetics: The Status of the Material World in Nineteenth-century French Drama." French Literature, Thought and Culture, ed. Brian Rigby. London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1993.

Hudston, Sara. Victorian Theatricals: From Menageries to Melodrama. London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2000.

Hughes, Winifred. The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860's. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Jackson, Russell. Victorian Theatre. London: A & C Black (Publishers) Limited, 1989.

Jenkins, Anthony. The Making of Victorian Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Kaplan, Fred. Dickens, A Biography. New York, New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1988.

Kendall, Guy. Charles Kingsley and His Ideas. London: Hutchinson & Company Limited, 1947.

Knight, William G. A Major London "Minor": The Surrey Theatre 1805-1865. London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1997.

Lonoff, Sue. Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1982.

Mander, Raymond and Joe Mitchenson. The Lost Theatres of London, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968.

Marks, John George. Life and Letters of Frederick Walker, A.R.A. London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1896.

Marshall, Gail. Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Perfection and the Galatea Myth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Marshall, William H. Wilkie Collins. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970.

McKay, Carol Hanberry. Dramatic Dickens. London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1989.

Meisel, Martin. Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Miller, D.A. The Novel and the Police. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1988.

Nayder, Lillian. Wilkie Collins. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.

Newsome, David. The Victorian World Picture. London: John Murray, 1997.

Nicoll, Allardyce. A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946.

O'Neill, Philip. Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety. Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1988.

Page, Norman, ed. Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.

Peters, Catherine. The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins. London: Secker & Warburg, 1991.

Peterson, Audrey. Victorian Masters of Mystery. New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co. Inc., 1984.

Prewitt-Brown, Julia. A Readers Guide to the 19th Century Novel. London: Collier MacMillan Press, 1985.

Pyket, Lyn. The Sensation Novel from *The Woman in White* to *The Moonstone*. Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1994.

Rahill, Frank. The World of Melodrama. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967.

Rance, Nicholas. Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.

Reynolds, Ernest. Early Victorian Drama (1830-1870). Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1936.

Richards, Kenneth & Thomson, Peter, eds. Nineteenth Century British Theatre. London: Metheun & Company, 1971.

Robertson, T.W. Six Plays. With an Introduction by Michael R. Booth. Ashover, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1980.

Robinson, Kenneth. Wilkie Collins: A Biography. London: The Bodley Head, 1951.

Rowell, George, ed. Nineteenth Century Plays. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Rowell, George. Theatre in the Age of Irving. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1981.

Rowell, George. The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Sayers, Dorothy. Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study. Manuscript, Marion E. Wade Centre, Wheaton College Library, Wheaton, Illinois.

Schoch, Richard W. Queen Victoria and the Theatre of her Age. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Scullion, Adrienne, ed. Female Playwrights of the Nineteenth Century. London: J M Dent, 1996.

Shattock, Joanne, ed. Dickens and Other Victorians. Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Limted, 1988.

Smith, Nelson and R.C. Terry, eds. Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments. New York, NY: AMS Press Limited, 1995.

Stephens, John Russell. The Censorship of English Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Stephens, John Russell. The Profession of the Playwright, British Theatre 1800-1900. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Sutherland, John. Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Sutherland, John. "Mystery of the Missing Fortnight", *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1996.

Sutherland, John. Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers. London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1995.

Sutherland, John. Victorian Novelists and Publishers. London: The Athlone Press, 1976.

Taylor, George. Players and Performance in the Victorian Theatre. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

Taylor, Jenny Bourne. In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and 19th Century Psychology. London: Routledge, 1988.

Taylor, John Russell. The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967.

Thoms, Peter. The Windings of the Labyrinth: Quest and Structure in the Major Novels of Wilkie Collins. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1992.

Thomson, David. England in the Nineteenth Century. London: The Penguin Group, 1950.

Thomson, Peter. On Actors and Acting. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000.

Tomalin, Claire. The Invisible Woman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

Watt, George. The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century Novel. London: Croom Helm Limited, 1984.

Woodfield, James. English Theatre in Transition 1881-1914. London: Croom Helm Limited, 1984.

Wynne, Deborah. The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.